"As one comes back to [Eliot's] books after years of absence they pour out, even against our expectations, the same store of energy and heat, so that we want more than anything to idle in the warmth."—VIRGINIA WOOLF

THE MILL ON THE FLOSS

The Modern Library

Classics

George ELIOT

Introduction by MARGOT LIVESEY

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THE MILL ON THE FLOSS

Introduction by Margot Livesey

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GEORGE ELIOT

George Eliot (née Mary Anne Evans), the Victorian novelist whose formidable intelligence and profound psychological insights pushed fiction into new realms as she chronicled provincial life in nineteenth-century England, was born at Arbury Farm, Warwickshire, on November 22, 1819. She grew up nearby at Griff House, an ivy-covered farmhouse in the parish of Chilvers Coton, and began to absorb the intricacies of English rural society while accompanying her father on his rounds as an estate agent for various properties. Raised in a strict Methodist family and educated by Evangelical teachers, Mary Anne Evans experienced a crisis of faith in the early 1840s when her association with the freethinking Coventry group led to a break with orthodox religion. In 1846 she completed a translation from the German of David Friedrich Strauss's highly controversial *Das Leben Jesu* (1835) as *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*. Marian Evans, as she later called herself, settled in London in 1851 to accept a position as writer and editor for the *Westminster Review*, a prestigious quarterly, and soon published a translation of Ludwig Feuerbach's unorthodox *Das Wesen des Christenthums* (1841) as *The Essence of Christianity* (1854). She became briefly involved with the philosopher Herbert Spencer, but in 1854 she scandalized Victorian England by eloping with scholar and critic George Henry Lewes, the married man who would be her companion for the next twenty-four years.

Encouraged by Lewes, Marian Evans began to write fiction. Her first story, "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton," was published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1857. The following year she brought out *Scenes of Clerical Life*, a book comprising "Amos Barton" and two other loosely connected novellas, under the pseudonym George Eliot. *Scenes of Clerical Life* won acclaim from a discerning readership, including Charles Dickens, who wrote: "The exquisite truth and delicacy, both of the humour and the pathos of [these]

stories, I have never seen the like of." Eliot's first novel, *Adam Bede*, was a huge bestseller when it appeared in 1859. Alexandre Dumas deemed her realistic depiction of rural domestic life "the masterpiece of the century." "There can be no mistake about *Adam Bede,"* stated *The Times* (London). "It is a first-rate novel, and its author takes rank at once among the masters of the art." Eliot quickly wrote two more Midland novels, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Silas Marner* (1861), followed by *Romola* (1863), a historical novel set in Renaissance Italy, and *Felix Holt, The Radical* (1866), a vivid portrayal of political ferment at the time of the Reform Bill of 1832. *The Spanish Gypsy*, a long dramatic poem framed against the background of the Spanish Inquisition, came out in 1869.

Eliot's next work, *Middlemarch*, perhaps the most comprehensive picture of provincial life in English fiction, was an immediate critical and popular success upon its serialization in *Blackwood's Magazine* beginning in December 1871. "No Victorian novel approaches *Middlemarch* in its width of reference, its intellectual power, or the imperturbable spaciousness of its narrative," noted V. S. Pritchett. "[Eliot's power] is at its highest in the mature *Middlemarch*, the magnificent book which with all its imperfections is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people," said Virginia Woolf. "George Eliot has built the whole novel *Middlemarch* around the theme of life's *indefiniteness,"* reflected psychiatrist and critic Robert Coles. "She paid close attention to human psychology, so close that she anticipates Freud in important respects by a good thirty years; quite simply she knew of the unconscious mind and, even more significant, knew exactly how that part of the mind works. She also paid close attention to the gradual and subtle way that money, power, and social position work their influence on the unconscious. *Middlemarch* is indeed a study as well as a story, an effort on the part of one novelist to answer those riddles Tolstoy posed just a year or two earlier in *War and Peace*. The two novels have often been compared; both are the products of minds unwilling to rest content with the usual intellectual categories.… [Eliot's] aim, like Tolstoy's, was to re-create the history of the immediate past,

and to do so she summoned more than her imaginative powers. *Middlenarch* is not only full of a social observer's comments and a historian's acquired facts but a philosopher's passion to find coherence for apparently diverse or unrelated phenomena." Indeed, novelist Margaret Drabble deemed *Middlemarch* "a book one can read, and reread, with no fear of exhausting its riches."

Eliot enjoyed great acclaim in the last decade of her life. She was widely regarded as England's leading novelist, with Queen Victoria numbering among her biggest fans. The drawing room at The Priory, Eliot's London home near Regent's Park, had to be enlarged to accommodate the crowds who flocked to her Sunday afternoon receptions. In 1874 she brought out a second volume of verse, *Legend of Jubal and Other Poems*, and her final novel, *Daniel Deronda*, appeared in 1876. The death of George Henry Lewes in 1878 left Eliot stricken with grief, but she soon managed to finish *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), a collection of essays. After an extended period of mourning, she astonished friends as well as the public by marrying John Walter Cross, a banker twenty years her junior. George Eliot died suddenly in London on December 22, 1880, and was buried next to Lewes in Highgate Cemetery. In 1980, to mark the centenary of her death, a memorial plaque bearing Eliot's name was placed in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey.

"George Eliot makes a large advance on the novelists who preceded her," observed V. S. Pritchett. "People do not appear haphazard in her books. They are not eccentrics. They are all planned and placed. She is orderly in her ethics; she is orderly in her social observation. She knows the country hierarchy and how a squire is this kind of man, a yeoman another, a teacher, a publican, a doctor, a clergyman another. They are more than themselves; they are their group as well. In this they recall the characters of Balzac." Virginia Woolf agreed: "[George Eliot] was one of the first English novelists to discover that men and women think as well as feel, and the discovery was of great artistic moment. Briefly, it meant that the novel ceased to be solely a love story, an autobiography, or a story of adventure. It became, as it had already become with the Russians,

of much wider scope." And Margaret Drabble concluded: "George Eliot was a great writer, who knew better than most of us the unpredictability, the inconsistency, the insatiable longings, and the conflicting demands of the human heart and mind."

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INTRODUCTION

Margot Livesey

George Eliot, born Mary Anne Evans, later also known as Marian, Polly, and Pollian, had a remarkably large head. A number of people who encountered her commented upon this, and a leading phrenologist of the time mistook a cast of her head for that of a man. Her friend Charles Bray, a keen amateur phrenologist, interpreted Eliot's cast as follows:

> In the Feelings, the Animal and Moral regions are about equal; the moral being quite sufficient to keep the animal in order and in due subservience.… The social feelings were very active, particularly adhesiveness. She was of a most affectionate disposition, always requiring someone to lean upon, preferring what has hitherto been considered the stronger sex to the other more impressible. She was not fitted to stand alone.

This analysis, although it makes Eliot seem too dependent, does capture some part of her lifelong struggle between the need for approval and other forces; it could also serve as a description of Maggie Tulliver, the beleaguered heroine of her second novel, *The Mill on the Floss*.

The Mill on the Floss is, to my mind, a book that devoutly needs an introduction. I first read it for a course on Victorian literature at university, and such is the vivid nature of the characters and the drama of their situation that Maggie has kept me company for more than two decades. If asked, I would have described her unhesitatingly as the heart of the novel; for one reason or another, I have often found myself picturing her two fatal trips down the river Floss, one with her cousin Lucy's fiancé, the other with her brother, Tom.

But the heart is not necessarily the most visible or obvious attribute of a person, or a work of art. Rereading the novel now,

without the pressure of a seminar to attend, I discover how many of the early pages are taken up with accounts of rural life and family chitchat. Even George Eliot's devoted publisher, John Blackwood, admitted that the beginning was overly expository. In "Book First: Boy and Girl" (by far the longest of the seven books that make up the novel) Eliot gives free rein to her nostalgia for the countryside she left soon after the death of her mother, and to which she returned only for brief visits. At times, turning these pages, I was reminded of Dickens at his most antic, or those scenes with clowns and rusticals that Shakespeare is so partial to in the comedies. To the modern reader, the nail seems to be hit on the head again and again and again, as we watch Maggie's aunts, the aggravating Dodson sisters, discuss jam-making and millinery and china patterns.

George Eliot herself confessed that she had been "beguiled by love of my subject" in the first two books, those concerning Maggie's and Tom's childhoods and Tom's schooling, and that this, combined with the compression of material in later parts, had resulted in a lack of proportion in the novel as a whole. What was so alluring to Eliot was not merely the landscape of her youth but the close relationship with her beloved brother, Isaac, the model for Tom Tulliver, from whom she went on to be estranged for much of her adult life.

Mary Anne Evans was born in 1819, the same year as Queen Victoria, the youngest child of her father's second marriage. Her father managed an estate in Warwickshire, and Mary Anne grew up enjoying many of the same rural pleasures as Maggie does, though unlike Maggie she was sent away to school. After the death of her mother and the marriage of her older sister, she and her father moved to the town of Coventry, where Mary Anne kept house for him. When he died, shortly before her thirtieth birthday, she moved to London and embarked on a radical activity for a woman of her class: earning her own living. She worked as an editor at the *Westminster Review*, and wrote book reviews and translations. It was at this time that she began to use what she judged the more sophisticated name of Marian.

Although she had been an imaginative child— “I was constantly living in a world of my own creation,” she later told a friend—Marian turned to writing fiction only in her midthirties, under the influence and encouragement of her companion, George Henry Lewes. Lewes himself was one of those prolific Victorian men of letters—translator, reviewer, essayist, editor—perhaps best known for his *Life of Goethe*. He had even written a couple of bad novels. He met Marian through her position at the *Westminster Review*, and the two gradually became friends, and then more than friends. In spite of his wife’s long-standing relationship—not to mention several children—with another man, Lewes was unable, under current law, to obtain a divorce. He and Marian made a trip to Europe and experimented with cohabitation in the more liberal climate there. After several months they returned to England and set up house together, very quietly, in Richmond. At moments of affection he sometimes called her Polly.

Soon after their return to England, in 1855, Marian began work on what was to become her first work of fiction, and George Eliot was born. The original impulse behind the pen name was to protect her from the negative publicity that might arise if reviewers were to discover her situation. She chose the name George, she later claimed, because it “was Mr. Lewes’s Christian name, and Eliot was a good mouth-filling, easily pronounced word.”

Scenes of Clerical Life, a collection of stories, was published in January 1858 and kindly received. Dickens, among others, took the time to praise it, and Eliot felt encouraged to proceed with her first novel, which she promised her publisher would be “full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay.” She and Lewes spent a good part of that year abroad, and Eliot wrote her very English novel in such cities as Munich and Dresden.

On January 12, 1859, almost two months after Marian’s thirty-ninth birthday, the couple were settled back in England, awaiting the publication of *Adam Bede*. Eliot records that she went into central London for the day to research cases of inundation; she had decided that her new novel was going to have a flood in it. The

expedition was a success, and she copied details of two major floods —Northumberland, in 1771, and Lincolnshire, in 1810—into her notebook. This pursuit of verisimilitude was to remain central to Eliot's fiction throughout her writing life; she needed to be able to picture the scenes of her novels and to know how things—a mill, a hospital, an estate—worked.

In spite of her notes, however, the novel, still untitled, proceeded slowly. At first she was distracted by anxieties about the reception of *Adam Bede*, and then, when reviews were favorable and sales strong, she found a new source of concern: after this triumph, how could her next novel not fail to disappoint?

But in one way or another, with many interruptions—for travel, research, mourning the death of her sister, negotiating a profitable contract—*The Mill on the Floss* did get written over the next fifteen months and was published in three volumes in April 1860. It is worth noting that the pace of Victorian publishing, so different from our own, must have made it difficult to consider the novel as a whole. In early February 1860, Lewes was returning corrected proofs of the first two books while Eliot was still hard at work on later pages. She finished the last book in a furious burst toward the end of March, and the novel was published two weeks later on April 4. It did not meet with the resounding success of its predecessor but was far from a disappointment. " 'George Eliot,' " *The Times* wrote, "is as great as ever."

Many early critics, in fact, seem to have praised precisely those parts of the novel that struck me as a little windy. And I should add, loudly and clearly, that the early pages contain many fine moments. The working life of the countryside, and of Mr. Tulliver's mill, is deftly evoked, and surely only a reader lacking certain essential organs would not be moved by the difficulties that beset the young Maggie. Left in charge of her brother's rabbits while he is away at school, she suddenly realizes, on the day of his return, that she has forgotten them. The rabbits are all dead. The blissful reunion—Tom has brought her her own fish-line—is ruined. "You're a naughty girl," said Tom severely, "and I'm sorry I bought you the fish-line. I

don't love you." Maggie protests that she couldn't help forgetting; the rabbits didn't come into her mind. "I'd forgive you, if you forgot anything," she says, and instinctively we believe her. But such generosity is irrelevant to Tom. Of course she could have helped it, he argues, if she'd minded what she was doing. Later, when the two children share a cake, he insists on giving Maggie the larger slice only to grow angry at her failure to offer him a bite. Poor Maggie.

In scene after brilliant scene, Eliot invokes the intense, operatic world of childhood, a world in which everything hangs in the balance, in which all may be lost or saved because of a cross word, a torn dress, a reckless haircut. And later, much of what has seemed slow in these opening pages does turn out to be relevant; one of the great gifts of the novel is that almost every character, except Tom, proves capable of surprising us, of stepping out of themselves and their histories into some heretofore unguessed-at capacity for empathy.

These gifts, however, require a kind of patience to which the busy contemporary reader is ill-accustomed. It's easy to get discouraged by the leisurely pace and slightly quaint tone of the opening. Also by the complex and meticulous machinations with which Eliot sets up Mr. Tulliver's downfall. So I am here to say, dear reader, keep going, keep turning those pages. And forgive yourself and the author for whatever lapses of attention may occur. You will be rewarded many times over by finding yourself a privileged visitor to a complex adult world in which the struggle between past and present affections, cerebral and physical passions, is rendered with an extraordinary insight and imagination. Eliot may have been nostalgic for that magical kingdom she could, thanks to her aloof brother and dead sister, reenter only on the page, but when it comes to such subjects as earning a living (she had to), acting in one's own worst interests (she often did), and the unspoken power of sexual attraction (she had several fraught liaisons before she met Lewes), she was a clear-eyed realist.

A number of years ago in London, I saw a stage adaptation of *The Mill on the Floss* in which Maggie was played, simultaneously, by

three actresses who argued, quarreled and struggled over her many actions and decisions; rarely did all three act in unison. More than most authors, Eliot understood the ways in which a person can be divided by contrary desires, between older and younger selves. But when she sat down to write, she was united. She wrote out of her whole self, bringing to bear on her characters and their situations all her keen sympathy and robust intellect. We, her readers, are in the profoundly fortunate situation of being in the presence of an author who can animate and illuminate our many selves: secret, social, moral, animal, affectionate, independent. She is as great as ever.

———

Margot Livesey, a native of Scotland, is the author of *Eva Moves the Furniture, The Missing World*, and *Criminals*. She lives in Massachusetts and London.

THE MILL ON THE FLOSS

In their death they were not divided

BOOK FIRST

BOY AND GIRL

CHAPTER I

Outside Dorlcote Mill

A wide plain, where the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea, and the loving tide, rushing to meet it, checks its passage with an impetuous embrace. On this mighty tide the black ships—laden with the fresh-scented fir-planks, with rounded sacks of oil-bearing seed, or with the dark glitter of coal—are borne along to the town of St. Ogg's, which shows its aged, fluted red roofs and the broad gables of its wharves between the low wooded hill and the river brink, tinging the water with a soft purple hue under the transient glance of this February sun. Far away on each hand stretch the rich pastures, and the patches of dark earth, made ready for the seed of broad-leaved green crops, or touched already with the tint of the tender-bladed autumn-sown corn. There is a remnant still of the last year's golden clusters of beehive ricks rising at intervals beyond the hedgerows; and everywhere the hedgerows are studded with trees: the distant ships seem to be lifting their masts and stretching their red-brown sails close among the branches of the spreading ash. Just by the red-roofed town the tributary Ripple flows with a lively current into the Floss. How lovely the little river is, with its dark, changing wavelets! It seems to me like a living companion while I wander along the bank and listen to its low placid voice, as to the voice of one who is deaf and loving. I remember those large dipping willows. I remember the stone bridge.

And this is Dorlcote Mill. I must stand a minute or two here on the bridge and look at it, though the clouds are threatening, and it is far on in the afternoon. Even in this leafless time of departing February it is pleasant to look at—perhaps the chill damp season adds a charm to the trimly-kept, comfortable dwelling-house, as old as the elms and chestnuts that shelter it from the northern blast. The

stream is brimful now, and lies high in this little withy plantation, and half drowns the grassy fringe of the croft in front of the house. As I look at the full stream, the vivid grass, the delicate bright-green powder softening the outline of the great trunks and branches that gleam from under the bare purple boughs, I am in love with moistness, and envy the white ducks that are dipping their heads far into the water here among the withes, unmindful of the awkward appearance they make in the drier world above.

The rush of the water, and the booming of the mill, bring a dreamy deafness, which seems to heighten the peacefulness of the scene. They are like a great curtain of sound, shutting one out from the world beyond. And now there is the thunder of the huge covered waggon coming home with sacks of grain. That honest waggoner is thinking of his dinner, getting sadly dry in the oven at this late hour; but he will not touch it till he has fed his horses,—the strong, submissive, meek-eyed beasts, who, I fancy, are looking mild reproach at him from between their blinkers, that he should crack his whip at them in that awful manner as if they needed that hint! See how they stretch their shoulders up the slope towards the bridge, with all the more energy because they are so near home. Look at their grand shaggy feet that seem to grasp the firm earth, at the patient strength of their necks, bowed under the heavy collar, at the mighty muscles of their struggling haunches! I should like well to hear them neigh over their hardly-earned feed of corn, and see them, with their moist necks freed from the harness, dipping their eager nostrils into the muddy pond. Now they are on the bridge, and down they go again at a swifter pace, and the arch of the covered waggon disappears at the turning behind the trees.

Now I can turn my eyes towards the mill again, and watch the unresting wheel sending out its diamond jets of water. That little girl is watching it too: she has been standing on just the same spot at the edge of the water ever since I paused on the bridge. And that queer white cur with the brown ear seems to be leaping and barking in ineffectual remonstrance with the wheel; perhaps he is jealous, because his playfellow in the beaver bonnet is so rapt in its

movement. It is time the little playfellow went in, I think; and there is a very bright fire to tempt her: the red light shines out under the deepening grey of the sky. It is time, too, for me to leave off resting my arms on the cold stone of this bridge.…

Ah, my arms are really benumbed. I have been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair, and dreaming that I was standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill, as it looked one February afternoon many years ago. Before I dozed off, I was going to tell you what Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver were talking about, as they sat by the bright fire in the left-hand parlour, on that very afternoon I have been dreaming of.

CHAPTER II

Mr. Tulliver, of Dorlcote Mill, Declares His Resolution About Tom

"What I want, you know," said Mr. Tulliver—"what I want is to give Tom a good eddication; an eddication as'll be a bread to him. That was what I was thinking of when I gave notice for him to leave the academy at Ladyday. I mean to put him to a downright good school at Midsummer. The two years at th' academy 'ud ha' done well enough, if I'd meant to make a miller and farmer of him, for he's had a fine sight more schoolin' nor *I* ever got: all the learnin' *my* father ever paid for was a bit o' birch at one end and the alphabet at th' other. But I should like Tom to be a bit of a scholard, so as he might be up to the tricks o' these fellows as talk fine and write with a flourish. It 'ud be a help to me wi' these lawsuits, and arbitrations, and things. I wouldn't make a downright lawyer o' the lad—I should be sorry for him to be a raskill—but a sort o' engineer, or a surveyor, or an auctioneer and vallyer, like Riley, or one o' them smartish businesses as are all profits and no outlay, only for a big watch-chain and a high stool. They're pretty nigh all one, and they're not far off being even wi' the law, *I* believe; for Riley looks Lawyer Wakem i' the face as hard as one cat looks another. *He's* none frightened at him."

Mr. Tulliver was speaking to his wife, a blond comely woman in a fan-shaped cap (I am afraid to think how long it is since fan-shaped caps were worn—they must be so near coming in again. At that time, when Mrs. Tulliver was nearly forty, they were new at St. Ogg's, and considered sweet things).

"Well, Mr. Tulliver, you know best: *I've* no objections. But hadn't I better kill a couple o' fowl and have th' aunts and uncles to dinner next week, so as you may hear what sister Glegg and sister Pullet have got to say about it? There's a couple o' fowl *wants* killing!"

“You may kill every fowl i’ the yard, if you like, Bessy; but I shall ask neither aunt nor uncle what I’m to do wi’ my own lad,” said Mr. Tulliver, defiantly.

“Dear heart!” said Mrs. Tulliver, shocked at this sanguinary rhetoric, “how can you talk so, Mr. Tulliver? But it’s your way to speak disrespectful o’ my family; and sister Glegg throws all the blame upo’ me, though I’m sure I’m as innocent as the babe unborn. For nobody’s ever heard *me* say as it wasn’t lucky for my children to have aunts and uncles as can live independent. Howiver, if Tom’s to go to a new school, I should like him to go where I can wash him and mend him; else he might as well have calico as linen, for they’d be one as yallow as th’ other before they’d been washed half-a-dozen times. And then, when the box is goin’ backards and forrards, I could send the lad a cake, or a pork-pie, or an apple; for he can do with an extry bit, bless him, whether they stint him at the meals or no. My children can eat as much victuals as most, thank God.”

“Well, well, we won’t send him out o’ reach o’ the carrier’s cart, if other things fit in,” said Mr. Tulliver. “But you mustn’t put a spoke i’ the wheel about the washin’, if we can’t get a school near enough. That’s the fault I have to find wi’ you, Bessy; if you see a stick i’ the road, you’re allays thinkin’ you can’t step over it. You’d want me not to hire a good waggoner, ’cause he’d got a mole on his face.”

“Dear heart!” said Mrs. Tulliver, in mild surprise, “when did I iver make objections to a man because he’d got a mole on his face? I’m sure I’m rether fond o’ the moles; for my brother, as is dead an’ gone, had a mole on his brow. But I can’t remember your iver offering to hire a waggoner with a mole, Mr. Tulliver. There was John Gibbs hadn’t a mole on his face no more nor you have, an’ I was all for having you hire *him;* an’ so you did hire him, an’ if he hadn’t died o’ th’ inflammation, as we paid Dr. Turnbull for attending him, he’d very like ha’ been driving the waggon now. He might have a mole somewhere out o’ sight, but how was I to know that, Mr. Tulliver?”

“No, no, Bessy; I didn’t mean justly the mole; I meant it to stand for summat else; but niver mind—it’s puzzling work, talking is.

What I'm thinking on, is how to find the right sort o' school to send Tom to, for I might be ta'en in again, as I've been wi' th' academy. I'll have nothing to do wi' a 'cademy again: whativer school I send Tom to, it shan't be a 'cademy; it shall be a place where the lads spend their time i' summat else besides blacking the family's shoes, and getting up the potatoes. It's an uncommon puzzling thing to know what school to pick."

Mr. Tulliver paused a minute or two, and dived with both hands into his breeches pockets as if he hoped to find some suggestion there. Apparently he was not disappointed, for he presently said, "I know what I'll do—I'll talk it over wi' Riley: he's coming tomorrow, t' arbitrate about the dam."

"Well, Mr. Tulliver, I've put the sheets out for the best bed, and Kezia's got 'em hanging at the fire. They aren't the best sheets, but they're good enough for anybody to sleep in, be he who he will; for as for them best Holland sheets, I should repent buying 'em, only they'll do to lay us out in. An' if you was to die to-morrow, Mr. Tulliver, they're mangled beautiful, an' all ready, an' smell o' lavender as it 'ud be a pleasure to lay 'em out; an' they lie at the left-hand corner o' the big oak linen-chest at the back: not as I should trust anybody to look 'em out but myself."

As Mrs. Tulliver uttered the last sentence, she drew a bright bunch of keys from her pocket, and singled out one, rubbing her thumb and finger up and down it with a placid smile while she looked at the clear fire. If Mr. Tulliver had been a susceptible man in his conjugal relation, he might have supposed that she drew out the key to aid her imagination in anticipating the moment when he would be in a state to justify the production of the best Holland sheets. Happily he was not so; he was only susceptible in respect of his right to water-power; moreover, he had the marital habit of not listening very closely, and since his mention of Mr. Riley, had been apparently occupied in a tactile examination of his woollen stockings.

"I think I've hit it, Bessy," was his first remark after a short silence. "Riley's as likely a man as any to know o' some school; he's

had schooling himself, an' goes about to all sorts o' places—arbitratin' and vallyin' and that. And we shall have time to talk it over tomorrow night when the business is done. I want Tom to be such a sort o' man as Riley, you know—as can talk pretty nigh as well as if it was all wrote out for him, and knows a good lot o' words as don't mean much, so as you can't lay hold of 'em i' law; and a good solid knowledge o' business too."

"Well," said Mrs. Tulliver, "so far as talking proper, and knowing everything, and walking with a bend in his back, and setting his hair up, I shouldn't mind the lad being brought up to that. But them fine-talking men from the big towns mostly wear the false shirt-fronts; they wear a frill till it's all a mess, and then hide it with a bib; I know Riley does. And then, if Tom's to go and live at Mudport, like Riley, he'll have a house with a kitchen hardly big enough to turn in, an' niver get a fresh egg for his breakfast, an' sleep up three pair o' stairs—or four, for what I know—an' be burnt to death before he can get down."

"No, no," said Mr. Tulliver, "I've no thoughts of his going to Mudport: I mean him to set up his office at St. Ogg's, closer by us, an' live at home. But," continued Mr. Tulliver after a pause, "what I'm a bit afraid on is, as Tom hasn't got the right sort o' brains for a smart fellow. I doubt he's a bit slowish. He takes after your family, Bessy."

"Yes, that he does," said Mrs. Tulliver, accepting the last proposition entirely on its own merits; "he's wonderful for liking a deal o' salt in his broth. That was my brother's way and my father's before him."

"It seems a bit of a pity, though," said Mr. Tulliver, "as the lad should take after the mother's side istead o' the little wench. That's the worst on't wi' the crossing o' breeds: you can never justly calkilate what'll come on't. The little un takes after my side, now: she's twice as 'cute as Tom. Too 'cute for a woman, I'm afraid," continued Mr. Tulliver, turning his head dubiously first on one side and then on the other. "It's no mischief much while she's a little un,

but an over-'cute woman's no better nor a long-tailed sheep—she'll fetch none the bigger price for that."

"Yes it *is* a mischief while she's a little un, Mr. Tulliver, for it all runs to naughtiness. How to keep her in a clean pinafore two hours together passes my cunning. An' now you put me i' mind," continued Mrs. Tulliver, rising and going to the window. "I don't know where she is now, an' it's pretty nigh tea-time. Ah, I thought so—wanderin' up an' down by the water, like a wild thing: she'll tumble in some day."

Mrs. Tulliver rapped the window sharply, beckoned, and shook her head,—a process which she repeated more than once before she returned to her chair.

"You talk o' 'cuteness, Mr. Tulliver," she observed as she sat down, "but I'm sure the child's half an idiot i' some things; for if I send her up-stairs to fetch anything, she forgets what she's gone for, an' perhaps 'ull sit down on the floor i' the sunshine an' plait her hair an' sing to herself like a Bedlam creatur', all the while I'm waiting for her down-stairs. That niver run i' my family, thank God, no more nor a brown skin as makes her look like a mulatter. I don't like to fly i' the face o' Providence, but it seems hard as I should have but one gell, an' her so comical."

"Pooh, nonsense!" said Mr. Tulliver, "she's a straight black-eyed wench as anybody need wish to see. I don't know i' what she's behind other folks's children; and she can read almost as well as the parson."

"But her hair won't curl all I can do with it, and she's so frenzy about having it put i' paper, and I've such work as never was to make her stand and have it pinched with th' irons."

"Cut it off—cut it off short," said the father, rashly.

"How can you talk so, Mr. Tulliver? She's too big a gell, gone nine, and tall of her age, to have her hair cut short; an' there's her cousin Lucy's got a row o' curls round her head, an' not a hair out o' place. It seems hard as my sister Deane should have that pretty child; I'm sure Lucy takes more after me nor my own child does.

Maggie, Maggie," continued the mother, in a tone of half-coaxing fretfulness, as this small mistake of nature entered the room, "where's the use o' my telling you to keep away from the water? You'll tumble in and be drownded some day, an' then you'll be sorry you didn't do as mother told you."

Maggie's hair, as she threw off her bonnet, painfully confirmed her mother's accusation: Mrs. Tulliver, desiring her daughter to have a curled crop, "like other folks's children," had had it cut too short in front to be pushed behind the ears; and as it was usually straight an hour after it had been taken out of paper, Maggie was incessantly tossing her head to keep the dark heavy locks out of her gleaming black eyes—an action which gave her very much the air of a small Shetland pony.

"O dear, O dear, Maggie, what are you thinkin' of, to throw your bonnet down there? Take it up-stairs, there's a good gell, an' let your hair be brushed, an' put your other pinafore on, an' change your shoes—do, for shame; an' come an' go on with your patchwork, like a little lady."

"O mother," said Maggie, in a vehemently cross tone, "I don't *want* to do my patchwork."

"What! not your pretty patchwork, to make a counterpane for your aunt Glegg?"

"It's foolish work," said Maggie, with a toss of her mane,—"tearing things to pieces to sew 'em together again. And I don't want to do anything for my aunt Glegg—I don't like her."

Exit Maggie, dragging her bonnet by the string, while Mr. Tulliver laughs audibly.

"I wonder at you, as you'll laugh at her, Mr. Tulliver," said the mother, with feeble fretfulness in her tone. "You encourage her i' naughtiness. An' her aunts will have it as it's me spoils her."

Mrs. Tulliver was what is called a good-tempered person—never cried, when she was a baby, on any slighter ground than hunger and pins; and from the cradle upwards had been healthy, fair, plump, and dull-witted; in short, the flower of her family for beauty and

amiability. But milk and mildness are not the best things for keeping, and when they turn only a little sour, they may disagree with young stomachs seriously. I have often wondered whether those early Madonnas of Raphael, with the blond faces and somewhat stupid expression, kept their placidity undisturbed when their strong-limbed, strong-willed boys got a little too old to do without clothing. I think they must have been given to feeble remonstrance, getting more and more peevish as it became more and more ineffectual.

CHAPTER III

Mr. Riley Gives His Advice Concerning a School for Tom

The gentleman in the ample white cravat and shirt-frill, taking his brandy-and-water so pleasantly with his good friend Tulliver, is Mr. Riley, a gentleman with a waxen complexion and fat hands, rather highly educated for an auctioneer and appraiser, but large-hearted enough to show a great deal of *bonhommie* towards simple country acquaintances of hospitable habits. Mr. Riley spoke of such acquaintances kindly as “people of the old school.”

The conversation had come to a pause. Mr. Tulliver, not without a particular reason, had abstained from a seventh recital of the cool retort by which Riley had shown himself too many for Dix, and how Wakem had had his comb cut for once in his life, now the business of the dam had been settled by arbitration, and how there never would have been any dispute at all about the height of water if everybody was what they should be, and Old Harry hadn’t made the lawyers. Mr. Tulliver was, on the whole, a man of safe traditional opinions; but on one or two points he had trusted to his unassisted intellect, and had arrived at several questionable conclusions; among the rest, that rats, weevils, and lawyers were created by Old Harry. Unhappily he had no one to tell him that this was rampant Manichæism, else he might have seen his error. But to-day it was clear that the good principle was triumphant: this affair of the water-power had been a tangled business somehow, for all it seemed —look at it one way—as plain as water’s water; but, big a puzzle as it was, it hadn’t got the better of Riley. Mr. Tulliver took his brandy-and-water a little stronger than usual, and, for a man who might be supposed to have a few hundreds lying idle at his banker’s, was rather incautiously open in expressing his high estimate of his friend’s business talents.

But the dam was a subject of conversation that would keep; it could always be taken up again at the same point, and exactly in the same condition; and there was another subject, as you know, on which Mr. Tulliver was in pressing want of Mr. Riley's advice. This was his particular reason for remaining silent for a short space after his last draught, and rubbing his knees in a meditative manner. He was not a man to make an abrupt transition. This was a puzzling world, as he often said, and if you drive your waggon in a hurry, you may light on an awkward corner. Mr. Riley, meanwhile, was not impatient. Why should he be? Even Hotspur, one would think, must have been patient in his slippers on a warm hearth, taking copious snuff, and sipping gratuitous brandy-and-water.

"There's a thing I've got i' my head," said Mr. Tulliver at last, in rather a lower tone than usual, as he turned his head and looked steadfastly at his companion.

"Ah!" said Mr. Riley, in a tone of mild interest. He was a man with heavy waxen eyelids and high-arched eyebrows, looking exactly the same under all circumstances. This immovability of face, and the habit of taking a pinch of snuff before he gave an answer, made him trebly oracular to Mr. Tulliver.

"It's a very particular thing," he went on; "it's about my boy Tom."

At the sound of this name, Maggie, who was seated on a low stool close by the fire, with a large book open on her lap, shook her heavy hair back and looked up eagerly. There were few sounds that roused Maggie when she was dreaming over her book, but Tom's name served as well as the shrillest whistle: in an instant she was on the watch, with gleaming eyes, like a Skye terrier suspecting mischief, or at all events determined to fly at any one who threatened it towards Tom.

"You see, I want to put him to a new school at Midsummer," said Mr. Tulliver; "he's comin' away from the 'cademy at Ladyday, an' I shall let him run loose for a quarter; but after that I want to send

him to a downright good school, where they'll make a scholard of him."

"Well," said Mr. Riley, "there's no greater advantage you can give him than a good education. Not," he added, with polite significance —"not that a man can't be an excellent miller and farmer, and a shrewd sensible fellow into the bargain, without much help from the schoolmaster."

"I believe you," said Mr. Tulliver, winking, and turning his head on one side, "but that's where it is. I don't *mean* Tom to be a miller and farmer. I see no fun i' that: why, if I made him a miller an' farmer, he'd be expectin' to take to the mill an' the land, an' a-hinting at me as it was time for me to lay by an' think o' my latter end. Nay, nay, I've seen enough o' that wi' sons. I'll never pull my coat off before I go to bed. I shall give Tom an eddication an' put him to a business, as he may make a nest for himself, an' not want to push me out o' mine. Pretty well if he gets it when I'm dead an' gone. I shan't be put off wi' spoon-meat afore I've lost my teeth."

This was evidently a point on which Mr. Tulliver felt strongly, and the impetus which had given unusual rapidity and emphasis to his speech, showed itself still unexhausted for some minutes afterwards, in a defiant motion of the head from side to side, and an occasional "Nay, nay," like a subsiding growl.

These angry symptoms were keenly observed by Maggie, and cut her to the quick. Tom, it appeared, was supposed capable of turning his father out of doors, and of making the future in some way tragic by his wickedness. This was not to be borne, and Maggie jumped up from her stool, forgetting all about her heavy book, which fell with a bang within the fender; and going up between her father's knees, said, in a half-crying, half-indignant voice—

"Father, Tom wouldn't be naughty to you ever; I know he wouldn't."

Mrs. Tulliver was out of the room superintending a choice supper-dish, and Mr. Tulliver's heart was touched; so Maggie was not scolded about the book. Mr. Riley quietly picked it up and looked at

it, while the father laughed with a certain tenderness in his hard-lined face, and patted his little girl on the back, and then held her hands and kept her between his knees.

“What! they mustn’t say any harm o’ Tom, eh?” said Mr. Tulliver, looking at Maggie with a twinkling eye. Then, in a lower voice, turning to Mr. Riley, as though Maggie couldn’t hear, “She understands what one’s talking about so as never was. And you should hear her read—straight off, as if she knowed it all beforehand. And allays at her book! But it’s bad—it’s bad,” Mr. Tulliver added, sadly, checking this blamable exultation; “a woman’s no business wi’ being so clever; it’ll turn to trouble, I doubt. But, bless you!”—here the exultation was clearly recovering the mastery—“she’ll read the books and understand ’em better nor half the folks as are growed up.”

Maggie’s cheeks began to flush with triumphant excitement: she thought Mr. Riley would have a respect for her now; it had been evident that he thought nothing of her before.

Mr. Riley was turning over the leaves of the book, and she could make nothing of his face, with its high-arched eyebrows; but he presently looked at her and said,

“Come, come and tell me something about this book; here are some pictures—I want to know what they mean.”

Maggie with deepening colour went without hesitation to Mr. Riley’s elbow and looked over the book, eagerly seizing one corner, and tossing back her mane, while she said,

“O, I’ll tell you what that means. It’s a dreadful picture, isn’t it? But I can’t help looking at it. That old woman in the water’s a witch—they’ve put her in to find out whether she’s a witch or no, and if she swims she’s a witch, and if she’s drowned—and killed, you know—she’s innocent, and not a witch, but only a poor silly old woman. But what good would it do her then, you know, when she was drowned? Only, I suppose, she’d go to heaven, and God would make it up to her. And this dreadful blacksmith with his arms akimbo, laughing—oh, isn’t he ugly?—I’ll tell you what he is. He’s the devil

really” (here Maggie’s voice became louder and more emphatic), “and not a right blacksmith; for the devil takes the shape of wicked men, and walks about and sets people doing wicked things, and he’s oftener in the shape of a bad man than any other, because, you know, if people saw he was the devil, and he roared at ’em, they’d run away, and he couldn’t make ’em do what he pleased.”

Mr. Tulliver had listened to this exposition of Maggie’s with petrifying wonder.

“Why, what book is it the wench has got hold on?” he burst out, at last.

“ ‘The History of the Devil,’ by Daniel Defoe; not quite the right book for a little girl,” said Mr. Riley. “How came it among your books, Tulliver?”

Maggie looked hurt and discouraged, while her father said,

“Why, it’s one o’ the books I bought at Partridge’s sale. They was all bound alike—it’s a good binding, you see—and I thought they’d be all good books. There’s Jeremy Taylor’s ‘Holy Living and Dying’ among ’em; I read in it often of a Sunday” (Mr. Tulliver felt somehow a familiarity with that great writer because his name was Jeremy); “and there’s a lot more of ’em, sermons mostly, I think; but they’ve all got the same covers, and I thought they were all o’ one sample, as you may say. But it seems one mustn’t judge by th’ outside. This is a puzzlin’ world.”

“Well,” said Mr. Riley, in an admonitory patronising tone, as he patted Maggie on the head, “I advise you to put by the ‘History of the Devil,’ and read some prettier book. Have you no prettier books?”

“O yes,” said Maggie, reviving a little in the desire to vindicate the variety of her reading, “I know the reading in this book isn’t pretty—but I like the pictures, and I make stories to the pictures out of my own head, you know. But I’ve got ‘Æsop’s Fables,’ and a book about kangaroos and things, and the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress….’ ”

“Ah, a beautiful book,” said Mr. Riley; “you can’t read a better.”

“Well, but there’s a great deal about the devil in that,” said Maggie, triumphantly, “and I’ll show you the picture of him in his true shape, as he fought with Christian.”

Maggie ran in an instant to the corner of the room, jumped on a chair, and reached down from the small bookcase a shabby old copy of Bunyan, which opened at once, without the least trouble of search, at the picture she wanted.

“Here he is,” she said, running back to Mr. Riley, “and Tom coloured him for me with his paints when he was at home last holidays—the body all black, you know, and the eyes red, like fire, because he’s all fire inside, and it shines out at his eyes.”

“Go, go!” said Mr. Tulliver, peremptorily, beginning to feel rather uncomfortable at these free remarks on the personal appearance of a being powerful enough to create lawyers; “shut up the book, and let’s hear no more o’ such talk. It is as I thought—the child ‘ull learn more mischief nor good wi’ the books. Go, go and see after your mother.”

Maggie shut up the book at once, with a sense of disgrace, but not being inclined to see after her mother, she compromised the matter by going into a dark corner behind her father’s chair, and nursing her doll, towards which she had an occasional fit of fondness in Tom’s absence, neglecting its toilette, but lavishing so many warm kisses on it that the waxen cheeks had a wasted unhealthy appearance.

“Did you ever hear the like on’t?” said Mr. Tulliver, as Maggie retired. “It’s a pity but what she’d been the lad—she’d ha’ been a match for the lawyers, *she* would. It’s the wonderful’st thing”—here he lowered his voice—“as I picked the mother because she wasn’t o’er ’cute—bein’ a good-looking woman too, an’ come of a rare family for managing; but I picked her from her sisters o’ purpose, ’cause she was a bit weak, like; for I wasn’t agoin’ to be told the rights o’ things by my own fireside. But you see when a man’s got brains himself, there’s no knowing where they’ll run to; an’ a pleasant sort o’ soft woman may go on breeding you stupid lads and

’cute wenches, till it’s like as if the world was turned topsy-turvy. It’s an uncommon puzzlin’ thing.”

Mr. Riley’s gravity gave way, and he shook a little under the application of his pinch of snuff, before he said—

“But your lad’s not stupid, is he? I saw him, when I was here last, busy making fishing-tackle; he seemed quite up to it.”

“Well, he isn’t not to say stupid—he’s got a notion o’ things out o’ door, an’ a sort o’ common-sense, as he’d lay hold o’ things by the right handle. But he’s slow with his tongue, you see, and he reads but poorly, and can’t abide the books, and spells all wrong, they tell me, an’ as shy as can be wi’ strangers, an’ you never hear him say ’cute things like the little wench. Now, what I want is to send him to a school where they’ll make him a bit nimble with his tongue and his pen, and make a smart chap of him. I want my son to be even wi’ these fellows as have got the start o’ me with having better schooling. Not but what, if the world had been left as God made it, I could ha’ seen my way, and held my own wi’ the best of ’em; but things have got so twisted round and wrapped up i’ unreasonable words, as aren’t a bit like ’em, as I’m clean at fault, often an’ often. Everything winds about so—the more straightforrard you are, the more you’re puzzled.”

Mr. Tulliver took a draught, swallowed it slowly, and shook his head in a melancholy manner, conscious of exemplifying the truth that a perfectly sane intellect is hardly at home in this insane world.

“You’re quite in the right of it, Tulliver,” observed Mr. Riley. “Better spend an extra hundred or two on your son’s education, than leave it him in your will. I know I should have tried to do so by a son of mine, if I’d had one, though, God knows, I haven’t your ready-money to play with, Tulliver; and I have a houseful of daughters into the bargain.”

“I daresay, now, you know of a school as ’ud be just the thing for Tom,” said Mr. Tulliver, not diverted from his purpose by any sympathy with Mr. Riley’s deficiency of ready cash.

Mr. Riley took a pinch of snuff, and kept Mr. Tulliver in suspence by a silence that seemed deliberative, before he said—

"I know of a very fine chance for any one that's got the necessary money, and that's what you have, Tulliver. The fact is, I wouldn't recommend any friend of mine to send a boy to a regular school, if he could afford to do better. But if any one wanted his boy to get superior instruction and training, where he would be the companion of his master, and that master a first-rate fellow—I know his man. I wouldn't mention the chance to everybody, because I don't think everybody would succeed in getting it, if he were to try; but I mention it to you, Tulliver—between ourselves."

The fixed inquiring glance with which Mr. Tulliver had been watching his friend's oracular face became quite eager.

"Ay, now, let's hear," he said, adjusting himself in his chair with the complacency of a person who is thought worthy of important communications.

"He's an Oxford man," said Mr. Riley, sententiously, shutting his mouth close, and looking at Mr. Tulliver to observe the effect of this stimulating information.

"What! a parson?" said Mr. Tulliver, rather doubtfully.

"Yes, and an M.A. The bishop, I understand, thinks very highly of him: why, it was the bishop who got him his present curacy."

"Ah?" said Mr. Tulliver, to whom one thing was as wonderful as another concerning these unfamiliar phenomena. "But what can he want wi' Tom, then?"

"Why, the fact is, he's fond of teaching, and wishes to keep up his studies, and a clergyman has but little opportunity for that in his parochial duties. He's willing to take one or two boys as pupils to fill up his time profitably. The boys would be quite of the family—the finest thing in the world for them; under Stelling's eye continually."

"But do you think they'd give the poor lad twice o' pudding?" said Mrs. Tulliver, who was now in her place again. "He's such a boy for

pudding as never was; an' a growing boy like that—it's dreadful to think o' their stintin' him."

"And what money 'ud he want?" said Mr. Tulliver, whose instinct told him that the services of this admirable M.A. would bear a high price.

"Why, I know of a clergyman who asks a hundred and fifty with his youngest pupils, and he's not to be mentioned with Stelling, the man I speak of. I know, on good authority, that one of the chief people at Oxford said, 'Stelling might get the highest honours if he chose.' But he didn't care about university honours. He's a quiet man—not noisy."

"Ah, a deal better—a deal better," said Mr. Tulliver; "but a hundred and fifty's an uncommon price. I never thought o' payin' so much as that."

"A good education, let me tell you, Tulliver—a good education is cheap at the money. But Stelling is moderate in his terms—he's not a grasping man. I've no doubt he'd take your boy at a hundred, and that's what you wouldn't get many other clergymen to do. I'll write to him about it, if you like."

Mr. Tulliver rubbed his knees, and looked at the carpet in a meditative manner.

"But belike he's a bachelor," observed Mrs. Tulliver in the interval, "an' I've no opinion o' housekeepers. There was my brother, as is dead an' gone, had a housekeeper once, an' she took half the feathers out o' the best bed, an' packed 'em up an' sent 'em away. An' it's unknown the linen she made away with—Stott her name was. It 'ud break my heart to send Tom where there's a housekeeper, an' I hope you won't think of it, Mr. Tulliver."

"You may set your mind at rest on that score, Mrs. Tulliver," said Mr. Riley, "for Stelling is married to as nice a little woman as any man need wish for a wife. There isn't a kinder little soul in the world; I know her family well. She has very much your complexion —light curly hair. She comes of a good Mudport family, and it's not every offer that would have been acceptable in that quarter. But

Stelling's not an everyday man. Rather a particular fellow as to the people he chooses to be connected with. But I *think* he would have no objection to take your son—I *think* he would not, on my representation."

"I don't know what he could have *against* the lad," said Mrs. Tulliver, with a slight touch of motherly indignation, "a nice fresh-skinned lad as anybody need wish to see."

"But there's one thing I'm thinking on," said Mr. Tulliver, turning his head on one side and looking at Mr. Riley, after a long perusal of the carpet. "Wouldn't a parson be almost too high-learnt to bring up a lad to be a man o' business? My notion o' the parsons was as they'd got a sort o' learning as lay mostly out o' sight. And that isn't what I want for Tom. I want him to know figures, and write like print, and see into things quick, and know what folks mean, and how to wrap things up in words as aren't actionable. It's an uncommon fine thing, that is," concluded Mr. Tulliver, shaking his head, "when you can let a man know what you think of him without paying for it."

"O my dear Tulliver," said Mr. Riley, "you're quite under a mistake about the clergy; all the best schoolmasters are of the clergy. The schoolmasters who are not clergymen, are a very low set of men generally"….

"Ay, that Jacobs is, at the 'cademy," interposed Mr. Tulliver.

"To be sure—men who have failed in other trades, most likely. Now a clergyman is a gentleman by profession and education; and besides that, he has the knowledge that will ground a boy, and prepare him for entering on any career with credit. There may be some clergymen who are mere book-men; but you may depend upon it, Stelling is not one of them—a man that's wide awake, let me tell you. Drop him a hint, and that's enough. You talk of figures, now; you have only to say to Stelling, 'I want my son to be a thorough arithmetician,' and you may leave the rest to him."

Mr. Riley paused a moment, while Mr. Tulliver, somewhat reassured as to clerical tutorship, was inwardly rehearsing to an

imaginary Mr. Stelling the statement, “I want my son to know ’rethmetic.”

“You see, my dear Tulliver,” Mr. Riley continued, “when you get a thoroughly educated man, like Stelling, he’s at no loss to take up any branch of instruction. When a workman knows the use of his tools, he can make a door as well as a window.”

“Ay, that’s true,” said Mr. Tulliver, almost convinced now that the clergy must be the best of schoolmasters.

“Well, I’ll tell you what I’ll do for you,” said Mr. Riley, “and I wouldn’t do it for everybody. I’ll see Stelling’s father-in-law, or drop him a line when I get back to Mudport, to say that you wish to place your boy with his son-in-law, and I daresay Stelling will write to you, and send you his terms.”

“But there’s no hurry, is there?” said Mrs. Tulliver; “for I hope, Mr. Tulliver, you won’t let Tom begin at his new school before Midsummer. He began at the ’cademy at the Ladyday quarter, and you see what good’s come of it.”

“Ay, ay, Bessy, never brew wi’ bad malt upo’ Michaelmas day, else you’ll have a poor tap,” said Mr. Tulliver, winking and smiling at Mr. Riley with the natural pride of a man who has a buxom wife conspicuously his inferior in intellect. “But it’s true there’s no hurry —you’ve hit it there, Bessy.”

“It might be as well not to defer the arrangement too long,” said Mr. Riley, quietly, “for Stelling may have propositions from other parties, and I know he would not take more than two or three boarders, if so many. If I were you, I think I would enter on the subject with Stelling at once: there’s no necessity for sending the boy before Midsummer, but I would be on the safe side, and make sure that nobody forestalls you.”

“Ay, there’s summat in that,” said Mr. Tulliver.

“Father,” broke in Maggie, who had stolen unperceived to her father’s elbow again, listening with parted lips, while she held her doll topsy-turvy, and crushed its nose against the wood of the chair

—“Father, is it a long way off where Tom is to go? shan’t we ever go to see him?”

“I don’t know, my wench,” said the father, tenderly. “Ask Mr. Riley; he knows.”

Maggie came round promptly in front of Mr. Riley, and said, “How far is it, please, sir.”

“O, a long long way off,” that gentleman answered, being of opinion that children, when they are not naughty, should always be spoken to jocosely. “You must borrow the seven-leagued boots to get to him.”

“That’s nonsense!” said Maggie, tossing her head haughtily, and turning away, with the tears springing in her eyes. She began to dislike Mr. Riley: it was evident he thought her silly and of no consequence.

“Hush Maggie, for shame of you, asking questions and chattering,” said her mother. “Come and sit down on your little stool and hold your tongue, do. But,” added Mrs. Tulliver, who had her own alarm awakened, “is it so far off as I couldn’t wash him and mend him?”

“About fifteen miles, that’s all,” said Mr. Riley. “You can drive there and back in a day quite comfortably. Or—Stelling is a hospitable, pleasant man—he’d be glad to have you stay.”

“But it’s too far off for the linen, I doubt,” said Mrs. Tulliver, sadly.

The entrance of supper opportunely adjourned this difficulty, and relieved Mr. Riley from the labour of suggesting some solution or compromise—a labour which he would otherwise doubtless have undertaken; for, as you perceive, he was a man of very obliging manners. And he had really given himself the trouble of recommending Mr. Stelling to his friend Tulliver without any positive expectation of a solid, definite advantage resulting to himself, notwithstanding the subtle indications to the contrary which might have misled a too sagacious observer. For there is nothing more widely misleading than sagacity if it happens to get

on a wrong scent; and sagacity, persuaded that men usually act and speak from distinct motives, with a consciously proposed end in view, is certain to waste its energies on imaginary game. Plotting covetousness, and deliberate contrivance, in order to compass a selfish end, are nowhere abundant but in the world of the dramatist: they demand too intense a mental action for many of our fellow-parishioners to be guilty of them. It is easy enough to spoil the lives of our neighbours without taking so much trouble: we can do it by lazy acquiescence and lazy omission, by trivial falsities for which we hardly know a reason, by small frauds neutralised by small extravagancies, by maladroit flatteries, and clumsily improvised insinuations. We live from hand to mouth, most of us, with a small family of immediate desires—we do little else than snatch a morsel to satisfy the hungry brood, rarely thinking of seed-corn or the next year's crop.

Mr. Riley was a man of business, and not cold towards his own interest, yet even he was more under the influence of small promptings than of far-sighted designs. He had no private understanding with the Rev. Walter Stelling; on the contrary he knew very little of that M.A. and his acquirements—not quite enough perhaps to warrant so strong a recommendation of him as he had given to his friend Tulliver. But he believed Mr. Stelling to be an excellent classic, for Gadsby had said so, and Gadsby's first cousin was an Oxford tutor; which was better ground for the belief even than his own immediate observation would have been, for though Mr. Riley had received a tincture of the classics at the great Mudport Free School, and had a sense of understanding Latin generally, his comprehension of any particular Latin was not ready. Doubtless there remained a subtle aroma from his juvenile contact with the *De Senectute* and the Fourth Book of the *Æneid*, but it had ceased to be distinctly recognisable as classical, and was only perceived in the higher finish and force of his auctioneering style. Then, Stelling was an Oxford man, and the Oxford men were always —no, no, it was the Cambridge men who were always good mathematicians. But a man who had had a university education

could teach anything he liked; especially a man like Stelling who had made a speech at a Mudport dinner on a political occasion, and had acquitted himself so well that it was generally remarked, this son-in-law of Timpson's was a sharp fellow. It was to be expected of a Mudport man, from the parish of St. Ursula, that he would not omit to do a good turn to a son-in-law of Timpson's, for Timpson was one of the most useful and influential men in the parish, and had a good deal of business, which he knew how to put into the right hands. Mr. Riley liked such men, quite apart from any money which might be diverted, through their good judgment, from less worthy pockets into his own; and it would be a satisfaction to him to say to Timpson on his return home, "I've secured a good pupil for your son-in-law." Timpson had a large family of daughters; Mr. Riley felt for him; besides, Louisa Timpson's face, with its light curls, had been a familiar object to him over the pew wainscot on a Sunday for nearly fifteen years: it was natural her husband should be a commendable tutor. Moreover, Mr. Riley knew of no other schoolmaster whom he had any ground for recommending in preference: why then should he not recommend Stelling? His friend Tulliver had asked him for an opinion: it is always chilling in friendly intercourse, to say you have no opinion to give. And if you deliver an opinion at all, it is mere stupidity not to do it with an air of conviction and well-founded knowledge. You make it your own in uttering it, and naturally get fond of it. Thus, Mr. Riley, knowing no harm of Stelling to begin with, and wishing him well, so far as he had any wishes at all concerning him, had no sooner recommended him than he began to think with admiration of a man recommended on such high authority, and would soon have gathered so warm an interest on the subject, that if Mr. Tulliver had in the end declined to send Tom to Stelling, Mr. Riley would have thought his "friend of the old school" a thoroughly pig-headed fellow.

If you blame Mr. Riley very severely for giving a recommendation on such slight grounds, I must say you are rather hard upon him. Why should an auctioneer and appraiser thirty years ago, who had as good as forgotten his free-school Latin, be expected to manifest a

delicate scrupulosity which is not always exhibited by gentlemen of the learned professions, even in our present advanced stage of morality?

Besides, a man with the milk of human kindness in him can scarcely abstain from doing a good-natured action, and one cannot be good-natured all round. Nature herself occasionally quarters an inconvenient parasite on an animal towards whom she has otherwise no ill-will. What then? We admire her care for the parasite. If Mr. Riley had shrunk from giving a recommendation that was not based on valid evidence, he would not have helped Mr. Stelling to a paying pupil, and that would not have been so well for the reverend gentleman. Consider, too, that all the pleasant little dim ideas and complacencies—of standing well with Timpson, of dispensing advice when he was asked for it, of impressing his friend Tulliver with additional respect, of saying something, and saying it emphatically, with other inappreciably minute ingredients that went along with the warm hearth and the brandy-and-water to make up Mr. Riley's consciousness on this occasion—would have been a mere blank.

CHAPTER IV

Tom is Expected

It was a heavy disappointment to Maggie that she was not allowed to go with her father in the gig when he went to fetch Tom home from the academy; but the morning was too wet, Mrs. Tulliver said, for a little girl to go out in her best bonnet. Maggie took the opposite view very strongly, and it was a direct consequence of this difference of opinion that when her mother was in the act of brushing out the reluctant black crop, Maggie suddenly rushed from under her hands and dipped her head in a basin of water standing near—in the vindictive determination that there should be no more chance of curls that day.

"Maggie, Maggie," exclaimed Mrs. Tulliver, sitting stout and helpless with the brushes on her lap, "what is to become of you if you're so naughty? I'll tell your aunt Glegg and your aunt Pullet when they come next week, and they'll never love you any more. O dear, O dear! look at your clean pinafore, wet from top to bottom. Folks 'ull think it's a judgment on me as I've got such a child—they'll think I've done summat wicked."

Before this remonstrance was finished, Maggie was already out of hearing, making her way towards the great attic that ran under the old high-pitched roof, shaking the water from her black locks as she ran, like a Skye terrier escaped from his bath. This attic was Maggie's favourite retreat on a wet day, when the weather was not too cold; here she fretted out all her ill-humours, and talked aloud to the worm-eaten floors and the worm-eaten shelves, and the dark rafters festooned with cobwebs; and here she kept a Fetish which she punished for all her misfortunes. This was the trunk of a large wooden doll, which once stared with the roundest of eyes above the reddest of cheeks; but was now entirely defaced by a long career of vicarious suffering. Three nails driven into the head commemorated

as many crises in Maggie's nine years of earthly struggle; that luxury of vengeance having been suggested to her by the picture of Jael destroying Sisera in the old Bible. The last nail had been driven in with a fiercer stroke than usual, for the Fetish on that occasion represented aunt Glegg. But immediately afterwards Maggie had reflected that if she drove many nails in, she would not be so well able to fancy that the head was hurt when she knocked it against the wall, nor to comfort it, and make believe to poultice it, when her fury was abated; for even aunt Glegg would be pitiable when she had been hurt very much, and thoroughly humiliated, so as to beg her niece's pardon. Since then she had driven no more nails in, but had soothed herself by alternately grinding and beating the wooden head against the rough brick of the great chimneys that made two square pillars supporting the roof. That was what she did this morning on reaching the attic, sobbing all the while with a passion that expelled every other form of consciousness—even the memory of the grievance that had caused it. As at last the sobs were getting quieter, and the grinding less fierce, a sudden beam of sunshine, falling through the wire lattice across the worm-eaten shelves, made her throw away the Fetish and run to the window. The sun was really breaking out; the sound of the mill seemed cheerful again; the granary doors were open; and there was Yap, the queer white-and-brown terrier, with one ear turned back, trotting about and sniffing vaguely, as if he were in search of a companion. It was irresistible. Maggie tossed her hair back and ran downstairs, seized her bonnet without putting it on, peeped, and then lashed along the passage lest she should encounter her mother, and was quickly out in the yard, whirling round like a Pythoness, and singing as she whirled, "Yap, Yap, Tom's coming home!" while Yap danced and barked round her, as much as to say, if there was any noise wanted he was the dog for it.

"Hegh, hegh, Miss, you'll make yourself giddy, an' tumble down i' the dirt," said Luke, the head miller, a tall broad-shouldered man of forty, black-eyed and black-haired, subdued by a general mealiness, like an auricula.

Maggie paused in her whirling and said, staggering a little, “O no, it doesn’t make me giddy, Luke; may I go into the mill with you?”

Maggie loved to linger in the great spaces of the mill, and often came out with her black hair powdered to a soft whiteness that made her dark eyes flash out with new fire. The resolute din, the unresting motion of the great stones, giving her a dim delicious awe as at the presence of an uncontrollable force—the meal for ever pouring, pouring—the fine white powder softening all surfaces, and making the very spider-nets look like a faery lace-work—the sweet pure scent of the meal—all helped to make Maggie feel that the mill was a little world apart from her outside everyday life. The spiders were especially a subject of speculation with her. She wondered if they had any relatives outside the mill, for in that case there must be a painful difficulty in their family intercourse—a fat and floury spider, accustomed to take his fly well dusted with meal, must suffer a little at a cousin’s table where the fly was *au naturel*, and the lady-spiders must be mutually shocked at each other’s appearance. But the part of the mill she liked best was the topmost story—the corn-hutch, where there were the great heaps of grain, which she could sit on and slide down continually. She was in the habit of taking this recreation as she conversed with Luke, to whom she was very communicative, wishing him to think well of her understanding, as her father did.

Perhaps she felt it necessary to recover her position with him on the present occasion, for, as she sat sliding on the heap of grain near which he was busying himself, she said, at that shrill pitch which was requisite in mill-society—

“I think you never read any book but the Bible—did you, Luke?”

“Nay, Miss—an’ not much o’ that,” said Luke, with great frankness. “I’m no reader, I aren’t.”

“But if I lent you one of my books, Luke? I’ve not got any *very* pretty books that would be easy for you to read; but there’s ‘Pug’s Tour of Europe’—that would tell you all about the different sorts of people in the world, and if you didn’t understand the reading, the

pictures would help you—they show the looks and ways of the people, and what they do. There are the Dutchmen, very fat, and smoking, you know—and one sitting on a barrel."

"Nay, Miss, I'n no opinion o' Dutchmen. There ben't much good i' knowin' about *them."*

"But they're our fellow-creatures, Luke—we ought to know about our fellow-creatures."

"Not much o' fellow-creaturs, I think, Miss; all I know—my old master, as war a knowin' man, used to say, says he, 'If e'er I sow my wheat wi'out brinin', I'm a Dutchman,' says he; an' that war as much as to say as a Dutchman war a fool, or next door. Nay, nay, I aren't goin' to bother mysen about Dutchmen. There's fools enoo—an' rogues enoo—wi'out lookin' i' books for 'em."

"O, well," said Maggie, rather foiled by Luke's unexpectedly decided views about Dutchmen, "perhaps you would like 'Animated Nature' better—that's not Dutchmen, you know, but elephants, and kangaroos, and the civet cat, and the sun-fish, and a bird sitting on its tail—I forget its name. There are countries full of those creatures, instead of horses and cows, you know. Shouldn't you like to know about them, Luke?"

"Nay, Miss, I'n got to keep count o' the flour an' corn—I can't do wi' knowin' so many things besides my work. That's what brings folks to the gallows—knowin' everything but what they'n got to get their bread by. An' they're mostly lies, I think, what's printed i' the books: them printed sheets are, anyhow, as the men cry i' the streets."

"Why, you're like my brother Tom, Luke," said Maggie, wishing to turn the conversation agreeably; "Tom's not fond of reading. I love Tom so dearly, Luke—better than anybody else in the world. When he grows up, I shall keep his house, and we shall always live together. I can tell him everything he doesn't know. But I think Tom's clever, for all he doesn't like books: he makes beautiful whipcord and rabbit-pens."

“Ah,” said Luke, “but he’ll be fine an’ vexed, as the rabbits are all dead.”

“Dead!” screamed Maggie, jumping up from her sliding seat on the corn. “O dear, Luke! What! the lop-eared one, and the spotted doe that Tom spent all his money to buy?”

“As dead as moles,” said Luke, fetching his comparison from the unmistakable corpses nailed to the stable-wall.

“O dear, Luke,” said Maggie, in a piteous tone, while the big tears rolled down her cheek; “Tom told me to take care of ’em, and I forgot. What *shall* I do?”

“Well, you see, Miss, they were in that far tool-house, an’ it was nobody’s business to see to ’em. I reckon Master Tom told Harry to feed ’em, but there’s no countin’ on Harry—*he’s* an offal creatur as iver come about the primises, he is. He remembers nothing but his own inside—an’ I wish it ’ud gripe him.”

“O, Luke, Tom told me to be sure and remember the rabbits every day; but how could I, when they didn’t come into my head, you know? O, he will be so angry with me, I know he will, and so sorry about his rabbits—and so am I sorry. O, what *shall* I do?”

“Don’t you fret, Miss,” said Luke, soothingly, “they’re nash things, them lop-eared rabbits—they’d happen ha’ died, if they’d been fed. Things out o’ natur niver thrive: God A’mighty doesn’t like ’em. He made the rabbits’ ears to lie back, an’ it’s nothin’ but contrairiness to make ’em hing down like a mastiff dog’s. Master Tom ‘ull know better nor buy such things another time. Don’t you fret, Miss. Will you come along home wi’ me, and see my wife? I’m a-goin’ this minute.”

The invitation offered an agreeable distraction to Maggie’s grief, and her tears gradually subsided as she trotted along by Luke’s side to his pleasant cottage, which stood with its apple and pear trees, and with the added dignity of a lean-to pig-sty, at the other end of the Mill fields. Mrs. Moggs, Luke’s wife, was a decidedly agreeable acquaintance. She exhibited her hospitality in bread and treacle, and possessed various works of art. Maggie actually forgot that she

had any special cause of sadness this morning, as she stood on a chair to look at a remarkable series of pictures representing the Prodigal Son in the costume of Sir Charles Grandison, except that, as might have been expected from his defective moral character, he had not, like that accomplished hero, the taste and strength of mind to dispense with a wig. But the indefinable weight the dead rabbits had left on her mind caused her to feel more than usual pity for the career of this weak young man, particularly when she looked at the picture where he leaned against a tree with a flaccid appearance, his knee-breeches unbuttoned and his wig awry, while the swine, apparently of some foreign breed, seemed to insult him by their good spirits over their feast of husks.

"I'm very glad his father took him back again—aren't you, Luke?" she said. "For he was very sorry, you know, and wouldn't do wrong again."

"Eh, Miss," said Luke, "he'd be no great shakes, I doubt, let's feyther do what he would for him."

That was a painful thought to Maggie, and she wished much that the subsequent history of the young man had not been left a blank.

CHAPTER V

Tom Comes Home

Tom was to arrive early in the afternoon, and there was another fluttering heart besides Maggie's when it was late enough for the sound of the gig-wheels to be expected; for if Mrs. Tulliver had a strong feeling, it was fondness for her boy. At last the sound came—that quick light bowling of the gig-wheels—and in spite of the wind, which was blowing the clouds about, and was not likely to respect Mrs. Tulliver's curls and cap-strings, she came outside the door, and even held her hand on Maggie's offending head, forgetting all the griefs of the morning.

"There he is, my sweet lad! But, Lord ha' mercy! he's got never a collar on; it's been lost on the road, I'll be bound, and spoilt the set."

Mrs. Tulliver stood with her arms open; Maggie jumped first on one leg and then on the other; while Tom descended from the gig, and said, with masculine reticence as to the tender emotions, "Hallo! Yap—what! are you there?"

Nevertheless he submitted to be kissed willingly enough, though Maggie hung on his neck in rather a strangling fashion, while his blue-grey eyes wandered towards the croft and the lambs and the river, where he promised himself that he would begin to fish the first thing to-morrow morning. He was one of those lads that grow everywhere in England, and, at twelve or thirteen years of age, look as much alike as goslings:—a lad with light-brown hair, cheeks of cream and roses, full lips, indeterminate nose and eyebrows—a physiognomy in which it seems impossible to discern anything but the generic character of boyhood; as different as possible from poor Maggie's phiz, which Nature seemed to have moulded and coloured with the most decided intention. But that same Nature has the deep cunning which hides itself under the appearance of openness, so that simple people think they can see through her quite well, and all

the while she is secretly preparing a refutation of their confident prophecies. Under these average boyish physiognomies that she seems to turn off by the gross, she conceals some of her most rigid, inflexible purposes, some of her most unmodifiable characters; and the dark-eyed, demonstrative, rebellious girl may after all turn out to be a passive being compared with this pink-and-white bit of masculinity with the indeterminate features.

"Maggie," said Tom, confidentially, taking her into a corner, as soon as his mother was gone out to examine his box, and the warm parlour had taken off the chill he had felt from the long drive, "you don't know what I've got in *my* pockets," nodding his head up and down as a means of rousing her sense of mystery.

"No," said Maggie. "How stodgy they look, Tom! Is it marls (marbles) or cobnuts?" Maggie's heart sank a little, because Tom always said it was "no good" playing with *her* at those games—she played so badly.

"Marls! no; I've swopped all my marls with the little fellows, and cobnuts are no fun, you silly, only when the nuts are green. But see here!" He drew something half out of his right-hand pocket.

"What is it?" said Maggie, in a whisper. "I can see nothing but a bit of yellow."

"Why it's … a … new … guess, Maggie!"

"O, I *can't* guess, Tom," said Maggie, impatiently.

"Don't be a spitfire, else I won't tell you," said Tom, thrusting his hand back into his pocket, and looking determined.

"No, Tom," said Maggie, imploringly, laying hold of the arm that was held stiffly in the pocket. "I'm not cross, Tom; it was only because I can't bear guessing. *Please* be good to me."

Tom's arm slowly relaxed, and he said, "Well, then it's a new fish-line—two new uns—one for you, Maggie, all to yourself. I wouldn't go halves in the toffee and gingerbread on purpose to save the money; and Gibson and Spouncer fought with me because I wouldn't. And here's hooks; see here!…. I say, *won't* we go and fish

to-morrow down by the Round Pool? And you shall catch your own fish, Maggie, and put the worms on, and everything—won't it be fun?"

Maggie's answer was to throw her arms round Tom's neck and hug him, and hold her cheek against his without speaking, while he slowly unwound some of the line, saying, after a pause,

"Wasn't I a good brother, now, to buy you a line all to yourself? You know, I needn't have bought it, if I hadn't liked."

"Yes, very, very good.… I *do* love you, Tom."

Tom had put the line back in his pocket, and was looking at the hooks one by one, before he spoke again.

"And the fellows fought me, because I wouldn't give in about the toffee."

"O dear! I wish they wouldn't fight at your school, Tom. Didn't it hurt you?"

"Hurt me? no," said Tom, putting up the hooks again, taking out a large pocket-knife, and slowly opening the largest blade, which he looked at meditatively as he rubbed his finger along it. Then he added—

"I gave Spouncer a black eye, I know—that's what he got by wanting to leather *me;* I wasn't going to go halves because anybody leathered me."

"O how brave you are, Tom! I think you're like Samson. If there came a lion roaring at me, I think you'd fight him—wouldn't you, Tom?"

"How can a lion come roaring at you, you silly thing? There's no lions, only in the shows."

"No; but if we were in the lion countries—I mean in Africa, where it's very hot—the lions eat people there. I can show it you in the book where I read it."

"Well, I should get a gun and shoot him."

“But if you hadn’t got a gun—we might have gone out, you know, not thinking—just as we go fishing; and then a great lion might run towards us roaring, and we couldn’t get away from him. What should you do, Tom?”

Tom paused, and at last turned away contemptuously, saying, “But the lion *isn’t* coming. What’s the use of talking?”

“But I like to fancy how it would be,” said Maggie, following him. “Just think what you would do, Tom.”

“O don’t bother, Maggie! you’re such a silly—I shall go and see my rabbits.”

Maggie’s heart began to flutter with fear. She dared not tell the sad truth at once, but she walked after Tom in trembling silence as he went out, thinking how she could tell him the news so as to soften at once his sorrow and his anger; for Maggie dreaded Tom’s anger of all things—it was quite a different anger from her own.

“Tom,” she said, timidly, when they were out of doors, “how much money did you give for your rabbits?”

“Two half-crowns and a sixpence,” said Tom, promptly.

“I think I’ve got a great deal more than that in my steel purse upstairs. I’ll ask mother to give it you.”

“What for?” said Tom. “I don’t want *your* money, you silly thing. I’ve got a great deal more money than you, because I’m a boy. I always have half-sovereigns and sovereigns for my Christmas boxes, because I shall be a man, and you only have five-shilling pieces, because you’re only a girl.”

“Well, but, Tom—if mother would let me give you two half-crowns and a sixpence out of my purse to put into your pocket and spend, you know; and buy some more rabbits with it?”

“More rabbits? I don’t want any more.”

“O, but, Tom, they’re all dead.”

Tom stopped immediately in his walk and turned round towards Maggie. “You forgot to feed ’em, then, and Harry forgot?” he said, his colour heightening for a moment, but soon subsiding. “I’ll pitch

into Harry—I'll have him turned away. And I don't love you, Maggie. You shan't go fishing with me to-morrow. I told you to go and see the rabbits every day." He walked on again.

"Yes, but I forgot—and I couldn't help it, indeed, Tom. I'm so very sorry," said Maggie, while the tears rushed fast.

"You're a naughty girl," said Tom, severely, "and I'm sorry I bought you the fish-line. I don't love you."

"O, Tom, it's very cruel," sobbed Maggie. "I'd forgive you, if *you* forgot anything—I wouldn't mind what you did—I'd forgive you and love you."

"Yes, you're a silly—but I never *do* forget things—*I* don't."

"O, please forgive me, Tom; my heart will break," said Maggie, shaking with sobs, clinging to Tom's arm, and laying her wet cheek on his shoulder.

Tom shook her off, and stopped again, saying in a peremptory tone, "Now, Maggie, you just listen. Aren't I a good brother to you?"

"Ye-ye-es," sobbed Maggie, her chin rising and falling convulsedly.

"Didn't I think about your fish-line all this quarter, and mean to buy it, and saved my money o' purpose, and wouldn't go halves in the toffee, and Spouncer fought me because I wouldn't?"

"Ye-ye-es … and I … lo-lo-love you so, Tom."

"But you're a naughty girl. Last holidays you licked the paint off my lozenge box, and the holidays before that you let the boat drag my fish-line down when I'd set you to watch it, and you pushed your head through my kite, all for nothing."

"But I didn't mean," said Maggie; "I couldn't help it."

"Yes, you could," said Tom, "if you'd minded what you were doing. And you're a naughty girl, and you shan't go fishing with me to-morrow."

With this terrible conclusion, Tom ran away from Maggie towards the mill, meaning to greet Luke there, and complain to him of

Harry.

Maggie stood motionless, except from her sobs, for a minute or two; then she turned round and ran into the house, and up to her attic, where she sat on the floor, and laid her head against the worm-eaten shelf, with a crushing sense of misery. Tom was come home, and she had thought how happy she should be—and now he was cruel to her. What use was anything, if Tom didn't love her? O, he was very cruel! Hadn't she wanted to give him the money, and said how very sorry she was? She knew she was naughty to her mother, but she had never been naughty to Tom—had never *meant* to be naughty to him.

"O, he is cruel!" Maggie sobbed aloud, finding a wretched pleasure in the hollow resonance that came through the long empty space of the attic. She never thought of beating or grinding her Fetish; she was too miserable to be angry.

These bitter sorrows of childhood! when sorrow is all new and strange, when hope has not yet got wings to fly beyond the days and weeks, and the space from summer to summer seems measureless.

Maggie soon thought she had been hours in the attic, and it must be tea-time, and they were all having their tea, and not thinking of her. Well, then, she would stay up there and starve herself—hide herself behind the tub, and stay there all night; and then they would all be frightened, and Tom would be sorry. Thus Maggie thought in the pride of her heart, as she crept behind the tub; but presently she began to cry again at the idea that they didn't mind her being there. If she went down again to Tom now—would he forgive her?—perhaps her father would be there, and he would take her part. But, then, she wanted Tom to forgive her because he loved her, not because his father told him. No, she would never go down if Tom didn't come to fetch her. This resolution lasted in great intensity for five dark minutes behind the tub; but then the need of being loved, the strongest need in poor Maggie's nature, began to wrestle with her pride, and soon threw it. She crept from behind her tub into the twilight of the long attic, but just then she heard a quick footstep on the stairs.

Tom had been too much interested in his talk with Luke, in going the round of the premises, walking in and out where he pleased, and whittling sticks without any particular reason, except that he didn't whittle sticks at school, to think of Maggie and the effect his anger had produced on her. He meant to punish her, and that business having been performed, he occupied himself with other matters, like a practical person. But when he had been called in to tea, his father said, "Why, where's the little wench?" and Mrs. Tulliver, almost at the same moment, said, "Where's your little sister?"—both of them having supposed that Maggie and Tom had been together all the afternoon.

"I don't know," said Tom. He didn't want to "tell" of Maggie, though he was angry with her; for Tom Tulliver was a lad of honour.

"What! hasn't she been playing with you all this while?" said the father. "She'd been thinking o' nothing but your coming home."

"I haven't seen her this two hours," says Tom, commencing on the plumcake.

"Goodness heart! she's got drownded," exclaimed Mrs. Tulliver, rising from her seat and running to the window. "How could you let her do so?" she added, as became a fearful woman, accusing she didn't know whom of she didn't know what.

"Nay, nay, she's none drownded," said Mr. Tulliver. "You've been naughty to her, I doubt, Tom?"

"I'm sure I haven't, father," said Tom, indignantly. "I think she's in the house."

"Perhaps up in that attic," said Mrs. Tulliver, "a-singing and talking to herself, and forgetting all about meal-times."

"You go and fetch her down, Tom," said Mr. Tulliver, rather sharply, his perspicacity or his fatherly fondness for Maggie making him suspect that the lad had been hard upon "the little un," else she would never have left his side. "And be good to her, do you hear? Else I'll let you know better."

Tom never disobeyed his father, for Mr. Tulliver was a peremptory man, and, as he said, would never let anybody get hold of his whip-hand; but he went out rather sullenly, carrying his piece of plumcake, and not intending to reprieve Maggie's punishment, which was no more than she deserved. Tom was only thirteen, and had no decided views in grammar and arithmetic, regarding them for the most part as open questions, but he was particularly clear and positive on one point—namely, that he would punish everybody who deserved it: why, he wouldn't have minded being punished himself, if he deserved it; but, then, he never *did* deserve it.

It was Tom's step, then, that Maggie heard on the stairs, when her need of love had triumphed over her pride, and she was going down with her swollen eyes and dishevelled hair to beg for pity. At least her father would stroke her head and say, "Never mind, my wench." It is a wonderful subduer, this need of love—this hunger of the heart—as peremptory as that other hunger by which Nature forces us to submit to the yoke, and change the face of the world.

But she knew Tom's step, and her heart began to beat violently with the sudden shock of hope. He only stood still at the top of the stairs and said, "Maggie, you're to come down." But she rushed to him and clung round his neck, sobbing, "O Tom, please forgive me—I can't bear it—I will always be good—always remember things—do love me—please, dear Tom!"

We learn to restrain ourselves as we get older. We keep apart when we have quarrelled, express ourselves in well-bred phrases, and in this way preserve a dignified alienation, showing much firmness on one side, and swallowing much grief on the other. We no longer approximate in our behaviour to the mere impulsiveness of the lower animals, but conduct ourselves in every respect like members of a highly civilised society. Maggie and Tom were still very much like young animals, and so she could rub her cheek against his, and kiss his ear in a random, sobbing way; and there were tender fibres in the lad that had been used to answer to Maggie's fondling; so that he behaved with a weakness quite

inconsistent with his resolution to punish her as much as she deserved: he actually began to kiss her in return, and say—

"Don't cry, then, Magsie—here, eat a bit o' cake."

Maggie's sobs began to subside, and she put out her mouth for the cake and bit a piece: and then Tom bit a piece, just for company, and they ate together and rubbed each other's cheeks and brows and noses together, while they ate, with a humiliating resemblance to two friendly ponies.

"Come along, Magsie, and have tea," said Tom at last, when there was no more cake except what was down-stairs.

So ended the sorrows of this day, and the next morning Maggie was trotting with her own fishing-rod in one hand and a handle of the basket in the other, stepping always, by a peculiar gift, in the muddiest places, and looking darkly radiant from under her beaver-bonnet because Tom was good to her. She had told Tom, however, that she should like him to put the worms on the hook for her, although she accepted his word when he assured her that worms couldn't feel (it was Tom's private opinion that it didn't much matter if they did). He knew all about worms, and fish, and those things; and what birds were mischievous, and how padlocks opened, and which way the handles of the gates were to be lifted. Maggie thought this sort of knowledge was very wonderful—much more difficult than remembering what was in the books; and she was rather in awe of Tom's superiority, for he was the only person who called her knowledge "stuff," and did not feel surprised at her cleverness. Tom, indeed, was of opinion that Maggie was a silly little thing; all girls were silly—they couldn't throw a stone so as to hit anything, couldn't do anything with a pocket-knife, and were frightened at frogs. Still he was very fond of his sister, and meant always to take care of her, make her his housekeeper, and punish her when she did wrong.

They were on their way to the Round Pool—that wonderful pool, which the floods had made a long while ago: no one knew how deep it was; and it was mysterious, too, that it should be almost a perfect

round, framed in with willows and tall reeds, so that the water was only to be seen when you got close to the brink. The sight of the old favourite spot always heightened Tom's good-humour, and he spoke to Maggie in the most amicable whispers, as he opened the precious basket, and prepared their tackle. He threw her line for her, and put the rod into her hand. Maggie thought it probable that the small fish would come to her hook, and the large ones to Tom's. But she had forgotten all about the fish, and was looking dreamily at the glassy water, when Tom said, in a loud whisper, "Look, look, Maggie!" and came running to prevent her from snatching her line away.

Maggie was frightened lest she had been doing something wrong, as usual, but presently Tom drew out her line and brought a large tench bouncing on the grass.

Tom was excited.

"O Magsie! you little duck! Empty the basket."

Maggie was not conscious of unusual merit, but it was enough that Tom called her Magsie, and was pleased with her. There was nothing to mar her delight in the whispers and the dreamy silences, when she listened to the light dipping sounds of the rising fish, and the gentle rustling, as if the willows and the reeds and the water had their happy whisperings also. Maggie thought it would make a very nice heaven to sit by the pool in that way, and never be scolded. She never knew she had a bite till Tom told her; but she liked fishing very much.

It was one of their happy mornings. They trotted along and sat down together, with no thought that life would ever change much for them: they would only get bigger and not go to school, and it would always be like the holidays; they would always live together and be fond of each other. And the mill with its booming—the great chestnut-tree under which they played at houses—their own little river, the Ripple, where the banks seemed like home, and Tom was always seeing the water-rats, while Maggie gathered the purple plumy tops of the reeds, which she forgot and dropped afterwards—above all, the great Floss, along which they wandered with a sense

of travel, to see the rushing spring-tide, the awful Eagre, come up like a hungry monster, or to see the Great Ash which had once wailed and groaned like a man—these things would always be just the same to them. Tom thought people were at a disadvantage who lived on any other spot of the globe; and Maggie, when she read about Christiana passing "the river over which there is no bridge," always saw the Floss between the green pastures by the Great Ash.

Life did change for Tom and Maggie; and yet they were not wrong in believing that the thoughts and loves of these first years would always make part of their lives. We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it,—if it were not the earth where the same flowers come up again every spring that we used to gather with our tiny fingers as we sat lisping to ourselves on the grass—the same hips and haws on the autumn hedgerows—the same redbreasts that we used to call "God's birds," because they did no harm to the precious crops. What novelty is worth that sweet monotony where everything is known, and *loved* because it is known?

The wood I walk in on this mild May day, with the young yellow-brown foliage of the oaks between me and the blue sky, the white star-flowers and the blue-eyed speedwell and the ground ivy at my feet—what grove of tropic palms, what strange ferns or splendid broad-petalled blossoms, could ever thrill such deep and delicate fibres within me as this home-scene? These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky, with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows—such things as these are the mother tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle inextricable associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them. Our delight in the sunshine on the deep-bladed grass to-day, might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls, if it were not for the sunshine and the grass in the far-off years which still live in us, and transform our perception into love.

CHAPTER VI

The Aunts and Uncles Are Coming

It was Easter week, and Mrs. Tulliver's cheese-cakes were more exquisitely light than usual: "a puff o' wind 'ud make 'em blow about like feathers," Kezia the housemaid said,—feeling proud to live under a mistress who could make such pastry; so that no season or circumstances could have been more propitious for a family party, even if it had not been advisable to consult sister Glegg and sister Pullet about Tom's going to school.

"I'd as lief not invite sister Deane this time," said Mrs. Tulliver, "for she's as jealous and having as can be, and 's allays trying to make the worst o' my poor children to their aunts and uncles."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Tulliver, "ask her to come. I never hardly get a bit o' talk with Deane now: we haven't had him this six months. What's it matter what she says?—my children need be beholding to nobody."

"That's what you allays say, Mr. Tulliver; but I'm sure there's nobody o' your side, neither aunt nor uncle, to leave 'em so much as a five-pound note for a leggicy. And there's sister Glegg, and sister Pullet too, saving money unknown—for they put by all their own interest and butter-money too; their husbands buy 'em everything." Mrs. Tulliver was a mild woman, but even a sheep will face about a little when she has lambs.

"Tchuh!" said Mr. Tulliver. "It takes a big loaf when there's many to breakfast. What signifies your sisters' bits o' money when they've got half-a-dozen nevvies and nieces to divide it among? And your sister Deane won't get 'em to leave all to one, I reckon, and make the country cry shame on 'em when they are dead?"

"I don't know what she won't get 'em to do," said Mrs. Tulliver, "for my children are so awk'ard wi' their aunts and uncles. Maggie's

ten times naughtier when they come than she is other days, and Tom doesn't like 'em, bless him—though it's more nat'ral in a boy than a gell. And there's Lucy Deane's such a good child—you may set her on a stool, and there she'll sit for an hour together, and never offer to get off. I can't help loving the child as if she was my own; and I'm sure she's more like *my* child than sister Deane's, for she'd allays a very poor colour for one of our family, sister Deane had."

"Well, well, if you're fond o' the child, ask her father and mother to bring her with 'em. And won't you ask their aunt and uncle Moss too? and some o' *their* children?"

"O dear, Mr. Tulliver, why, there'd be eight people besides the children, and I must put two more leaves i' the table, besides reaching down more o' the dinner-service; and you know as well as I do, as *my* sisters and *your* sister don't suit well together."

"Well, well, do as you like, Bessy," said Mr. Tulliver, taking up his hat and walking out to the mill. Few wives were more submissive than Mrs. Tulliver on all points unconnected with her family relations; but she had been a Miss Dodson, and the Dodsons were a very respectable family indeed—as much looked up to as any in their own parish, or the next to it. The Miss Dodsons had always been thought to hold up their heads very high, and no one was surprised the two eldest had married so well—not at an early age, for that was not the practice of the Dodson family. There were particular ways of doing everything in that family: particular ways of bleaching the linen, of making the cowslip wine, curing the hams, and keeping the bottled gooseberries; so that no daughter of that house could be indifferent to the privilege of having been born a Dodson, rather than a Gibson or a Watson. Funerals were always conducted with peculiar propriety in the Dodson family: the hatbands were never of a blue shade, the gloves never split at the thumb, everybody was a mourner who ought to be, and there were always scarfs for the bearers. When one of the family was in trouble or sickness, all the rest went to visit the unfortunate member, usually at the same time, and did not shrink from uttering the most

disagreeable truths that correct family feeling dictated: if the illness or trouble was the sufferer's own fault, it was not in the practice of the Dodson family to shrink from saying so. In short, there was in this family a peculiar tradition as to what was the right thing in household management and social demeanour, and the only bitter circumstance attending this superiority was a painful inability to approve the condiments or the conduct of families ungoverned by the Dodson tradition. A female Dodson, when in "strange houses," always ate dry bread with her tea, and declined any sort of preserves, having no confidence in the butter, and thinking that the preserves had probably begun to ferment from want of due sugar and boiling. There were some Dodsons less like the family than others—that was admitted; but in so far as they were "kin," they were of necessity better than those who were "no kin." And it is remarkable that while no individual Dodson was satisfied with any other individual Dodson, each was satisfied, not only with him or her self, but with the Dodsons collectively. The feeblest member of a family—the one who has the least character—is often the merest epitome of the family habits and traditions; and Mrs. Tulliver was a thorough Dodson, though a mild one, as small-beer, so long as it is anything, is only describable as very weak ale: and though she had groaned a little in her youth under the yoke of her elder sisters, and still shed occasional tears at their sisterly reproaches, it was not in Mrs. Tulliver to be an innovator on the family ideas. She was thankful to have been a Dodson, and to have one child who took after her own family, at least in his features and complexion, in liking salt and in eating beans, which a Tulliver never did.

In other respects the true Dodson was partly latent in Tom, and he was as far from appreciating his "kin" on the mother's side as Maggie herself; generally absconding for the day with a large supply of the most portable food, when he received timely warning that his aunts and uncles were coming; a moral symptom from which his aunt Glegg deduced the gloomiest views of his future. It was rather hard on Maggie that Tom always absconded without letting her into

the secret, but the weaker sex are acknowledged to be serious *impedimenta* in cases of flight.

On Wednesday, the day before the aunts and uncles were coming, there were such various and suggestive scents, as of plumcakes in the oven and jellies in the hot state, mingled with the aroma of gravy, that it was impossible to feel altogether gloomy: there was hope in the air. Tom and Maggie made several inroads into the kitchen, and, like other marauders, were induced to keep aloof for a time only by being allowed to carry away a sufficient load of booty.

"Tom," said Maggie, as they sat on the boughs of the elder-tree, eating their jam puffs, "shall you run away to-morrow?"

"No," said Tom, slowly, when he had finished his puff, and was eyeing the third, which was to be divided between them—"No, I shan't."

"Why, Tom? Because Lucy's coming?"

"No," said Tom, opening his pocket-knife and holding it over the puff, with his head on one side in a dubitative manner. (It was a difficult problem to divide that very irregular polygon into two equal parts.) "What do *I* care about Lucy? She's only a girl—*she* can't play at bandy."

"Is it the tipsy cake, then?" said Maggie, exerting her hypothetic powers, while she leaned forward towards Tom with her eyes fixed on the hovering knife.

"No, you silly, that'll be good the day after. It's the pudden. I know what the pudden's to be—apricot roll-up—O my buttons!"

With this interjection, the knife descended on the puff and it was in two, but the result was not satisfactory to Tom, for he still eyed the halves doubtfully. At last he said—

"Shut your eyes, Maggie."

"What for?"

"You never mind what for. Shut 'em, when I tell you."

Maggie obeyed.

“Now, which’ll you have, Maggie—right hand or left?”

“I’ll have that with the jam run out,” said Maggie, keeping her eyes shut to please Tom.

“Why, you don’t like that, you silly. You may have it if it comes to you fair, but I shan’t give it you without. Right or left—you choose, now. Ha-a-a!” said Tom, in a tone of exasperation, as Maggie peeped. “You keep your eyes shut, now, else you shan’t have any.”

Maggie’s power of sacrifice did not extend so far; indeed, I fear she cared less that Tom should enjoy the utmost possible amount of puff, than that he should be pleased with her for giving him the best bit. So she shut her eyes quite close, till Tom told her to “say which,” and then she said, “Left hand.”

“You’ve got it,” said Tom, in rather a bitter tone.

“What! the bit with the jam run out?”

“No; here, take it,” said Tom, firmly, handing decidedly the best piece to Maggie.

“O, please, Tom, have it: I don’t mind—I like the other: please take this.”

“No, I shan’t,” said Tom, almost crossly, beginning on his own inferior piece.

Maggie, thinking it was no use to contend further, began too, and ate up her half puff with considerable relish as well as rapidity. But Tom had finished first, and had to look on while Maggie ate her last morsel or two, feeling in himself a capacity for more. Maggie didn’t know Tom was looking at her; she was seesawing on the elder bough, lost to almost everything but a vague sense of jam and idleness.

“O, you greedy thing!” said Tom, when she had swallowed the last morsel. He was conscious of having acted very fairly, and thought she ought to have considered this, and made up to him for it. He would have refused a bit of hers beforehand, but one is naturally at a different point of view before and after one’s own share of puff is swallowed.

Maggie turned quite pale. “O, Tom, why didn’t you ask me?”

“I wasn’t going to ask you for a bit, you greedy. You might have thought of it without, when you knew I gave you the best bit.”

“But I wanted you to have it—you know I did,” said Maggie, in an injured tone.

“Yes, but I wasn’t going to do what wasn’t fair, like Spouncer. He always takes the best bit, if you don’t punch him for it; and if you choose the best with your eyes shut, he changes his hands. But if I go halves, I’ll go ’em fair—only I wouldn’t be a greedy.”

With this cutting innuendo, Tom jumped down from his bough, and threw a stone with a “hoigh!” as a friendly attention to Yap, who had also been looking on while the eatables vanished, with an agitation of his ears and feelings which could hardly have been without bitterness. Yet the excellent dog accepted Tom’s attention with as much alacrity as if he had been treated quite generously.

But Maggie, gifted with that superior power of misery which distinguishes the human being, and places him at a proud distance from the most melancholy chimpanzee, sat still on her bough, and gave herself up to the keen sense of unmerited reproach. She would have given the world not to have eaten all her puff, and to have saved some of it for Tom. Not but that the puff was very nice, for Maggie’s palate was not at all obtuse, but she would have gone without it many times over, sooner than Tom should call her greedy and be cross with her. And he had said he wouldn’t have it—and she ate it without thinking—how could she help it? The tears flowed so plentifully that Maggie saw nothing around her for the next ten minutes; but by that time resentment began to give way to the desire of reconciliation, and she jumped from her bough to look for Tom. He was no longer in the paddock behind the rickyard—where was he likely to be gone, and Yap with him? Maggie ran to the high bank against the great holly-tree, where she could see far away towards the Floss. There was Tom; but her heart sank again as she saw how far off he was on his way to the great river, and that he had another companion besides Yap—naughty Bob Jakin, whose

official, if not natural function, of frightening the birds, was just now at a standstill. Maggie felt sure that Bob was wicked, without very distinctly knowing why; unless it was because Bob's mother was a dreadfully large fat woman, who lived at a queer round house down the river; and once, when Maggie and Tom had wandered thither, there rushed out a brindled dog that wouldn't stop barking; and when Bob's mother came out after it, and screamed above the barking to tell them not to be frightened, Maggie thought she was scolding them fiercely, and her heart beat with terror. Maggie thought it very likely that the round house had snakes on the floor, and bats in the bed-room: for she had seen Bob take off his cap to show Tom a little snake that was inside it, and another time he had a handful of young bats: altogether, he was an irregular character, perhaps even slightly diabolical, judging from his intimacy with snakes and bats; and to crown all, when Tom had Bob for a companion, he didn't mind about Maggie, and would never let her go with him.

It must be owned that Tom was fond of Bob's company. How could it be otherwise? Bob knew, directly he saw a bird's egg, whether it was a swallow's, or a tomtit's, or a yellowhammer's; he found out all the wasps' nests, and could set all sorts of traps; he could climb the trees like a squirrel, and had quite a magical power of detecting hedgehogs and stoats; and he had courage to do things that were rather naughty, such as making gaps in the hedgerows, throwing stones after the sheep, and killing a cat that was wandering *incognito*. Such qualities in an inferior, who could always be treated with authority in spite of his superior knowingness, had necessarily a fatal fascination for Tom; and every holiday-time Maggie was sure to have days of grief because he had gone off with Bob.

Well! there was no hope for it: he was gone now, and Maggie could think of no comfort but to sit down by the holly, or wander by the hedgerow, and fancy it was all different, refashioning her little world into just what she should like it to be.

Maggie's was a troublous life, and this was the form in which she took her opium.

Meanwhile Tom, forgetting all about Maggie and the sting of reproach which he had left in her heart, was hurrying along with Bob, whom he had met accidentally, to the scene of a great rat-catching in a neighbouring barn. Bob knew all about this particular affair, and spoke of the sport with an enthusiasm which no one who is not either divested of all manly feeling, or pitiably ignorant of rat-catching, can fail to imagine. For a person suspected of preternatural wickedness, Bob was really not so very villanous-looking; there was even something agreeable in his snub-nosed face, with its close-curled border of red hair. But then his trousers were always rolled up at the knee, for the convenience of wading on the slightest notice; and his virtue, supposing it to exist, was undeniably "virtue in rags," which, on the authority even of bilious philosophers, who think all well-dressed merit over-paid, is notoriously likely to remain unrecognised (perhaps because it is seen so seldom).

"I know the chap as owns the ferrets," said Bob, in a hoarse treble voice, as he shuffled along, keeping his blue eyes fixed on the river, like an amphibious animal who foresaw occasion for darting in. "He lives up the Kennel Yard at Sut Ogg's—he does. He's the biggest rot-catcher anywhere—he is. I'd sooner be a rot-catcher nor anything—I would. The moles is nothing to the rots. But Lors! you mun ha' ferrets. Dogs is no good. Why, there's that dog, now!" Bob continued, pointing with an air of disgust towards Yap, "he's no more good wi' a rot nor nothin'. I see it myself—I did—at the rotcatchin' i' your feyther's barn."

Yap, feeling the withering influence of this scorn, tucked his tail in and shrank close to Tom's leg, who felt a little hurt for him, but had not the superhuman courage to seem behindhand with Bob in contempt for a dog who made so poor a figure.

"No, no," he said, "Yap's no good at sport. I'll have regular good dogs for rats and everything, when I've done school."

“Hev ferrets, Measter Tom,” said Bob, eagerly,—“them white ferrets wi’ pink eyes; Lors, you might catch your own rots, an’ you might put a rot in a cage wi’ a ferret, an’ see ’em fight—you might. That’s what I’d do, I know, an’ it ’ud be better fun a’most nor seein’ two chaps fight—if it wasn’t them chaps as sold cakes an’ oranges at the Fair, as the things flew out o’ their baskets, an’ some o’ the cakes was smashed … But they tasted just as good,” added Bob, by way of note or addendum; after a moment’s pause.

“But, I say, Bob,” said Tom, in a tone of deliberation, “ferrets are nasty biting things—they’ll bite a fellow without being set on.”

“Lors! why, that’s the beauty on ’em. If a chap lays hold o’ your ferret, he won’t be long before he hollows out a good un—*he* won’t.”

At this moment a striking incident made the boys pause suddenly in their walk. It was the plunging of some small body in the water from among the neighbouring bulrushes: if it was not a water-rat, Bob intimated that he was ready to undergo the most unpleasant consequences.

“Hoigh! Yap—hoigh! there he is,” said Tom, clapping his hands, as the little black snout made its arrowy course to the opposite bank. “Seize him, lad, seize him!”

Yap agitated his ears and wrinkled his brows, but declined to plunge, trying whether barking would not answer the purpose just as well.

“Ugh! you coward!” said Tom, and kicked him over, feeling humiliated as a sportsman to possess so poor-spirited an animal. Bob abstained from remark and passed on, choosing, however, to walk in the shallow edge of the overflowing river by way of change.

“He’s none so full now, the Floss isn’t,” said Bob, as he kicked the water up before him, with an agreeable sense of being insolent to it. “Why, last ‘ear, the meadows was all one sheet o’ water, they was.”

“Ay, but,” said Tom, whose mind was prone to see an opposition between statements that were really quite accordant—“but there was a big flood once, when the Round Pool was made. *I* know there

was, 'cause father says so. And the sheep and cows were all drowned, and the boats went all over the fields ever such a way."

"*I* don't care about a flood comin'," said Bob; "I don't mind the water, no more nor the land. I'd swim—*I* would."

"Ah, but if you got nothing to eat for ever so long?" said Tom, his imagination becoming quite active under the stimulus of that dread. "When I'm a man, I shall make a boat with a wooden house on the top of it, like Noah's ark, and keep plenty to eat in it—rabbits and things—all ready. And then if the flood came, you know, Bob, I shouldn't mind.... And I'd take you in, if I saw you swimming," he added, in the tone of a benevolent patron.

"I aren't frighted," said Bob, to whom hunger did not appear so appalling. "But I'd get in an' knock the rabbits on th' head when you wanted to eat 'em."

"Ah, and I should have halfpence, and we'd play at heads-and-tails," said Tom, not contemplating the possibility that this recreation might have fewer charms for his mature age. "I'd divide fair to begin with, and then we'd see who'd win."

"I've got a halfpenny o' my own," said Bob, proudly, coming out of the water and tossing his halfpenny in the air. "Yeads or tails?"

"Tails," said Tom, instantly fired with the desire to win.

"It's yeads," said Bob, hastily, snatching up the halfpenny as it fell.

"It wasn't," said Tom, loudly and peremptorily. "You give me the halfpenny—I've won it fair."

"I shan't," said Bob, holding it tight in his pocket.

"Then I'll make you—see if I don't," said Tom.

"You can't make me do nothing, you can't," said Bob.

"Yes, I can."

"No, you can't."

"I'm master."

"I don't care for you."

“But I’ll make you care, you cheat,” said Tom, collaring Bob and shaking him.

“You get out wi’ you,” said Bob, giving Tom a kick.

Tom’s blood was thoroughly up: he went at Bob with a lunge and threw him down, but Bob seized hold and kept it like a cat, and pulled Tom down after him. They struggled fiercely on the ground for a moment or two, till Tom, pinning Bob down by the shoulders, thought he had the mastery.

“You say you’ll give me the halfpenny now,” he said, with difficulty, while he exerted himself to keep the command of Bob’s arms.

But at this moment, Yap, who had been running on before, returned barking to the scene of action, and saw a favourable opportunity for biting Bob’s bare leg not only with impunity but with honour. The pain from Yap’s teeth, instead of surprising Bob into a relaxation of his hold, gave it a fiercer tenacity, and, with a new exertion of his force, he pushed Tom backward and got uppermost. But now Yap, who could get no sufficient purchase before, set his teeth in a new place, so that Bob, harassed in this way, let go his hold of Tom, and, almost throttling Yap, flung him into the river. By this time Tom was up again, and before Bob had quite recovered his balance after the act of swinging Yap, Tom fell upon him, threw him down, and got his knees firmly on Bob’s chest.

“You give me the halfpenny now,” said Tom.

“Take it,” said Bob, sulkily.

“No, I shan’t take it; you give it me.”

Bob took the halfpenny out of his pocket, and threw it away from him on the ground.

Tom loosed his hold, and left Bob to rise.

“There the halfpenny lies,” he said. “I don’t want your halfpenny; I wouldn’t have kept it. But you wanted to cheat: I hate a cheat. I shan’t go along with you any more,” he added, turning round homeward, not without casting a regret towards the rat-catching

and other pleasures which he must relinquish along with Bob's society.

"You may let it alone, then," Bob called out after him. "I shall cheat if I like; there's no fun i' playing else; and I know where there's a goldfinch's nest, but I'll take care *you* don't.... An' you're a nasty fightin' turkey-cock, you are...."

Tom walked on without looking round, and Yap followed his example, the cold bath having moderated his passions.

"Go along wi' you, then, wi' your drownded dog; I wouldn't own such a dog—*I* wouldn't," said Bob, getting louder, in a last effort to sustain his defiance. But Tom was not to be provoked into turning round, and Bob's voice began to falter a little as he said,

"An' I'n gi'en you everything, an' showed you everything, an' niver wanted nothin' from you.... An' there's your horn-handed knife, then, as you gi'en me.... "Here Bob flung the knife as far as he could after Tom's retreating footsteps. But it produced no effect, except the sense in Bob's mind that there was a terrible void in his lot, now that the knife was gone.

He stood still till Tom had passed through the gate and disappeared behind the hedge. The knife would do no good on the ground there—it wouldn't vex Tom, and pride or resentment was a feeble passion in Bob's mind compared with the love of a pocket-knife. His very fingers sent entreating thrills that he would go and clutch that familiar rough buck's-horn handle, which they had so often grasped for mere affection as it lay idle in his pocket. And there were two blades, and they had just been sharpened! What is life without a pocket-knife to him who has once tasted a higher existence? No: to throw the handle after the hatchet is a comprehensible act of desperation, but to throw one's pocket-knife after an implacable friend is clearly in every sense a hyperbole, or throwing beyond the mark. So Bob shuffled back to the spot where the beloved knife lay in the dirt, and felt quite a new pleasure in clutching it again after the temporary separation, in opening one blade after the other, and feeling their edge with his well-hardened

thumb. Poor Bob! he was not sensitive on the point of honour—not a chivalrous character. That fine moral aroma would not have been thought much of by the public opinion of Kennel Yard, which was the very focus or heart of Bob's world, even if it could have made itself perceptible there; yet, for all that, he was not utterly a sneak and a thief, as our friend Tom had hastily decided.

But Tom, you perceive, was rather a Rhadamanthine personage, having more than the usual share of boy's justice in him—the justice that desires to hurt culprits as much as they deserve to be hurt, and is troubled with no doubts concerning the exact amount of their deserts. Maggie saw a cloud on his brow when he came home, which checked her joy at his coming so much sooner than she had expected, and she dared hardly speak to him as he stood silently throwing the small gravel-stones into the mill-dam. It is not pleasant to give up a rat-catching when you have set your mind on it. But if Tom had told his strongest feeling at that moment, he would have said, "I'd do just the same again." That was his usual mode of viewing his past actions; whereas Maggie was always wishing she had done something different.

CHAPTER VII

Enter the Aunts and Uncles

The Dodsons were certainly a handsome family, and Mrs. Glegg was not the least handsome of the sisters. As she sat in Mrs. Tulliver's arm-chair, no impartial observer could have denied that for a woman of fifty she had a very comely face and figure, though Tom and Maggie considered their aunt Glegg as the type of ugliness. It is true she despised the advantages of costume, for though, as she often observed, no woman had better clothes, it was not her way to wear her new things out before her old ones. Other women, if they liked, might have their best thread-lace in every wash; but when Mrs. Glegg died, it would be found that she had better lace laid by in the right-hand drawer of her wardrobe, in the Spotted Chamber, than ever Mrs. Wooll of St. Ogg's had bought in her life, although Mrs. Wooll wore her lace before it was paid for. So of her curled fronts: Mrs. Glegg had doubtless the glossiest and crispest brown curls in her drawers, as well as curls in various degrees of fuzzy laxness; but to look out on the week-day world from under a crisp and glossy front, would be to introduce a most dreamlike and unpleasant confusion between the sacred and the secular. Occasionally, indeed, Mrs. Glegg wore one of her third-best fronts on a week-day visit, but not at a sister's house; especially not at Mrs. Tulliver's, who, since her marriage, had hurt her sisters' feelings greatly by wearing her own hair, though, as Mrs. Glegg observed to Mrs. Deane, a mother of a family, like Bessy, with a husband always going to law, might have been expected to know better. But Bessy was always weak!

So if Mrs. Glegg's front to-day was more fuzzy and lax than usual, she had a design under it: she intended the most pointed and cutting allusion to Mrs. Tulliver's bunches of blond curls, separated from each other by a due wave of smoothness on each side of the parting.

Mrs. Tulliver had shed tears several times at sister Glegg's unkindness on the subject of these unmatronly curls, but the consciousness of looking the handsomer for them, naturally administered support. Mrs. Glegg chose to wear her bonnet in the house to-day—untied and tilted slightly, of course—a frequent practice of hers when she was on a visit, and happened to be in a severe humour: she didn't know what draughts there might be in strange houses. For the same reason she wore a small sable tippet, which reached just to her shoulders, and was very far from meeting across her well-formed chest, while her long neck was protected by a *chevaux-de-frise* of miscellaneous frilling. One would need to be learned in the fashions of those times to know how far in the rear of them Mrs. Glegg's slate-coloured silk-gown must have been; but from certain constellations of small yellow spots upon it, and a mouldy odour about it suggestive of a damp clothes-chest, it was probable that it belonged to a stratum of garments just old enough to have come recently into wear.

Mrs. Glegg held her large gold watch in her hand with the many-doubled chain round her fingers, and observed to Mrs. Tulliver, who had just returned from a visit to the kitchen, that whatever it might be by other people's clocks and watches, it was gone half-past twelve by hers.

"I don't know what ails sister Pullet," she continued. "It used to be the way in our family for one to be as early as another,—I'm sure it was so in my poor father's time—and not for one sister to sit half an hour before the others came. But if the ways o' the family are altered, it shan't be *my* fault—*I'll* never be the one to come into a house when all the rest are going away. I wonder *at* sister Deane—she used to be more like me. But if you'll take my advice, Bessy, you'll put the dinner forrard a bit, sooner than put it back, because folks are late as ought to ha' known better."

"O dear, there's no fear but what they'll be all here in time, sister," said Mrs. Tulliver, in her mild-peevish tone. "The dinner won't be ready till half-past one. But if it's long for you to wait, let me fetch you a cheese-cake and a glass o' wine."

“Well, Bessy!” said Mrs. Glegg, with a bitter smile, and a scarcely perceptible toss of her head, “I should ha’ thought you’d known your own sister better. I never *did* eat between meals, and I’m not going to begin. Not but what I hate that nonsense of having your dinner at half-past one, when you might have it at one. You was never brought up in that way, Bessy.”

“Why, Jane, what can I do? Mr. Tulliver doesn’t like his dinner before two o’clock, but I put it half an hour earlier because o’ you.”

“Yes, yes, I know how it is with husbands—they’re for putting everything off—they’ll put the dinner off till after tea, if they’ve got wives as are weak enough to give in to such work; but it’s a pity for you, Bessy, as you haven’t got more strength o’ mind. It’ll be well if your children don’t suffer for it. And I hope you’ve not gone and got a great dinner for us—going to expense for your sisters, as ’ud sooner eat a crust o’ dry bread nor help to ruin you with extravagance. I wonder you don’t take pattern by your sister Deane—she’s far more sensible. And here you’ve got two children to provide for, and your husband’s spent your fortin i’ going to law, and’s likely to spend his own too. A boiled joint, as you could make broth of for the kitchen,” Mrs. Glegg added, in a tone of emphatic protest, “and a plain pudding, with a spoonful o’ sugar, and no spice, ’ud be far more becoming.”

With sister Glegg in this humour, there was a cheerful prospect for the day. Mrs. Tulliver never went the length of quarrelling with her, any more than a waterfowl that puts out its leg in a deprecating manner can be said to quarrel with a boy who throws stones. But this point of the dinner was a tender one, and not at all new, so that Mrs. Tulliver could make the same answer she had often made before.

“Mr. Tulliver says he always *will* have a good dinner for his friends while he can pay for it,” she said, “and he’s a right to do as he likes in his own house, sister.”

“Well, Bessy, *I* can’t leave your children enough out o’ my savings, to keep ’em from ruin. And you mustn’t look to having any o’ Mr.

Glegg's money, for it's well if I don't go first—he comes of a long-lived family; and if he was to die and leave me well for my life, he'd tie all the money up to go back to his own kin."

The sound of wheels while Mrs. Glegg was speaking was an interruption highly welcome to Mrs. Tulliver, who hastened out to receive sister Pullet—it must be sister Pullet, because the sound was that of a four-wheel.

Mrs. Glegg tossed her head and looked rather sour about the mouth at the thought of the "four-wheel." She had a strong opinion on that subject.

Sister Pullet was in tears when the one-horse chaise stopped before Mrs. Tulliver's door, and it was apparently requisite that she should shed a few more before getting out, for though her husband and Mrs. Tulliver stood ready to support her, she sat still and shook her head sadly, as she looked through her tears at the vague distance.

"Why, whativer is the matter, sister?" said Mrs. Tulliver. She was not an imaginative woman, but it occurred to her that the large toilet-glass in sister Pullet's best bedroom was possibly broken for the second time.

There was no reply but a further shake of the head, as Mrs. Pullet slowly rose and got down from the chaise, not without casting a glance at Mr. Pullet to see that he was guarding her handsome silk dress from injury. Mr. Pullet was a small man with a high nose, small twinkling eyes, and thin lips, in a fresh-looking suit of black and a white cravat, that seemed to have been tied very tight on some higher principle than that of mere personal ease. He bore about the same relation to his tall, good-looking wife, with her balloon sleeves, abundant mantle, and large be-feathered and be-ribboned bonnet, as a small fishing-smack bears to a brig with all its sails spread.

It is a pathetic sight and a striking example of the complexity introduced into the emotions by a high state of civilisation—the sight of a fashionably drest female in grief. From the sorrow of a

Hottentot to that of a woman in large buckram sleeves, with several bracelets on each arm, an architectural bonnet, and delicate ribbon-strings—what a long series of gradations! In the enlightened child of civilisation the abandonment characteristic of grief is checked and varied in the subtlest manner, so as to present an interesting problem to the analytic mind. If, with a crushed heart and eyes half-blinded by the mist of tears, she were to walk with a too devious step through a door-place, she might crush her buckram sleeves too, and the deep consciousness of this possibility produces a composition of forces by which she takes a line that just clears the doorpost. Perceiving that the tears are hurrying fast, she unpins her strings and throws them languidly backward—a touching gesture, indicative, even in the deepest gloom, of the hope in future dry moments when cap-strings will once more have a charm. As the tears subside a little, and with her head leaning backward at the angle that will not injure her bonnet, she endures that terrible moment when grief, which has made all things else a weariness, has itself become weary; she looks down pensively at her bracelets, and adjusts their clasps with that pretty studied fortuity which would be gratifying to her mind if it were once more in a calm and healthy state.

Mrs. Pullet brushed each doorpost with great nicety, about the latitude of her shoulders (at that period a woman was truly ridiculous to an instructed eye if she did not measure a yard and a half across the shoulders), and having done that, sent the muscles of her face in quest of fresh tears as she advanced into the parlour where Mrs. Glegg was seated.

“Well, sister, you’re late; what’s the matter?” said Mrs. Glegg, rather sharply, as they shook hands.

Mrs. Pullet sat down—lifting up her mantle carefully behind, before she answered,—

“She’s gone,” unconsciously using an impressive figure of rhetoric.

“It isn’t the glass this time, then,” thought Mrs. Tulliver.

“Died the day before yesterday,” continued Mrs. Pullet; “an’ her legs was as thick as my body,” she added, with deep sadness, after a pause. “They’d tapped her no end o’ times, and the water—they say you might ha’ swum in it, if you’d liked.”

“Well, Sophy, it’s a mercy she’s gone, then, whoever she may be,” said Mrs. Glegg, with the promptitude and emphasis of a mind naturally clear and decided; “but I can’t think who you’re talking of, for my part.”

“But *I* know,” said Mrs. Pullet, sighing and shaking her head; “and there isn’t another such a dropsy in the parish. *I* know as it’s old Mrs. Sutton o’ the Twentylands.”

“Well, she’s no kin o’ yours, nor much acquaintance as I’ve ever heared of,” said Mrs. Glegg, who always cried just as much as was proper when anything happened to her own “kin,” but not on other occasions.

“She’s so much acquaintance as I’ve seen her legs when they was like bladders.… And an old lady as had doubled her money over and over again, and kept it all in her own management to the last, and had her pocket with her keys in under her pillow constant. There isn’t many old *par*ish’ners like her, I doubt.”

“And they say she’d took as much physic as ’ud fill a waggon,” observed Mr. Pullet.

“Ah,” sighed Mrs. Pullet, “she’d another complaint ever so many years before she had the dropsy, and the doctors couldn’t make out what it was. And she said to me, when I went to see her last Christmas, she said, ‘Mrs. Pullet, if ever you have the dropsy, you’ll think o’ me.’ She *did* say so,” added Mrs. Pullet, beginning to cry bitterly again; “those were her very words. And she’s to be buried o’ Saturday, and Pullet’s bid to the funeral.”

“Sophy,” said Mrs. Glegg, unable any longer to contain her spirit of rational remonstrance—“Sophy, I wonder *at* you, fretting and injuring your health about people as don’t belong to you. Your poor father never did so, nor your aunt Frances neither, nor any o’ the family as I ever heared of. You couldn’t fret no more than this, if

we'd heared as our cousin Abbott had died sudden without making his will."

Mrs. Pullet was silent, having to finish her crying, and rather flattered than indignant at being upbraided for crying too much. It was not everybody who could afford to cry so much about their neighbours who had left them nothing; but Mrs. Pullet had married a gentleman farmer, and had leisure and money to carry her crying and everything else to the highest pitch of respectability.

"Mrs. Sutton didn't die without making her will, though," said Mr. Pullet, with a confused sense that he was saying something to sanction his wife's tears; "ours is a rich parish, but they say there's nobody else to leave as many thousands behind 'em as Mrs. Sutton. And she's left no leggicies, to speak on—left it all in a lump to her husband's nevvy."

"There wasn't much good i' being so rich, then," said Mrs. Glegg, "if she'd got none but husband's kin to leave it to. It's poor work when that's all you've got to pinch yourself for;—not as I'm one o' those as 'ud like to die without leaving more money out at interest than other folks had reckoned. But it's a poor tale when it must go out o' your own family."

"I'm sure, sister," said Mrs. Pullet, who had recovered sufficiently to take off her veil and fold it carefully, "it's a nice sort o' man as Mrs. Sutton has left her money to, for he's troubled with the asthmy, and goes to bed every night at eight o'clock. He told me about it himself—as free as could be—one Sunday when he came to our church. He wears a hare-skin on his chest, and has a trembling in his talk—quite a gentleman sort o' man. I told him there wasn't many months in the year as I wasn't under the doctor's hands. And he said, 'Mrs. Pullet, I can feel for you.' That was what he said—the very words. Ah!" sighed Mrs. Pullet, shaking her head at the idea that there were but few who could enter fully into her experiences in pink mixture and white mixture, strong stuff in small bottles, and weak stuff in large bottles, damp boluses at a shilling, and draughts at eighteenpence. "Sister, I may as well go and take my bonnet off

now. Did you see as the cap-box was put out?" she added, turning to her husband.

Mr. Pullet, by an unaccountable lapse of memory, had forgotten it, and hastened out, with a stricken conscience, to remedy the omission.

"They'll bring it up-stairs, sister," said Mrs. Tulliver, wishing to go at once, lest Mrs. Glegg should begin to explain her feelings about Sophy's being the first Dodson who ever ruined her constitution with doctor's stuff.

Mrs. Tulliver was fond of going up-stairs with her sister Pullet, and looking thoroughly at her cap before she put it on her head, and discussing millinery in general. This was part of Bessy's weakness, that stirred Mrs. Glegg's sisterly compassion: Bessy went far too well drest, considering; and she was too proud to dress her child in the good clothing her sister Glegg gave her from the primeval strata of her wardrobe; it was a sin and a shame to buy anything to dress that child, if it wasn't a pair of shoes. In this particular, however, Mrs. Glegg did her sister Bessy some injustice, for Mrs. Tulliver had really made great efforts to induce Maggie to wear a leghorn bonnet and a dyed silk frock made out of her aunt Glegg's, but the results had been such that Mrs. Tulliver was obliged to bury them in her maternal bosom; for Maggie, declaring that the frock smelt of nasty dye, had taken an opportunity of basting it together with the roast-beef the first Sunday she wore it, and, finding this scheme answer, she had subsequently pumped on the bonnet with its green ribbons, so as to give it a general resemblance to a sage cheese garnished with withered lettuces. I must urge in excuse for Maggie, that Tom had laughed at her in the bonnet, and said she looked like an old Judy. Aunt Pullet, too, made presents of clothes, but these were always pretty enough to please Maggie as well as her mother. Of all her sisters, Mrs. Tulliver certainly preferred her sister Pullet, not without a return of preference; but Mrs. Pullet was sorry Bessy had those naughty awkward children; she would do the best she could by them, but it was a pity they weren't as good and as pretty as sister Deane's child. Maggie and Tom, on their part, thought their

aunt Pullet tolerable, chiefly because she was not their aunt Glegg. Tom always declined to go more than once, during his holidays, to see either of them: both his uncles tipped him that once, of course; but at his aunt Pullet's there was a great many toads to pelt in the cellar-area, so that he preferred the visit to her. Maggie shuddered at the toads, and dreamed of them horribly, but she liked her uncle Pullet's musical snuffbox. Still, it was agreed by the sisters, in Mrs. Tulliver's absence, that the Tulliver blood did not mix well with the Dodson blood; that, in fact, poor Bessy's children were Tullivers, and that Tom, notwithstanding he had the Dodson complexion, was likely to be as "contrairy" as his father. As for Maggie, she was the picture of her aunt Moss, Mr. Tulliver's sister,—a large-boned woman, who had married as poorly as could be; had no china, and had a husband who had much ado to pay his rent. But when Mrs. Pullet was alone with Mrs. Tulliver up-stairs, the remarks were naturally to the disadvantage of Mrs. Glegg, and they agreed, in confidence, that there was no knowing what sort of fright sister Jane would come out next. But their *tête-à-tête* was curtailed by the appearance of Mrs. Deane with little Lucy; and Mrs. Tulliver had to look on with a silent pang while Lucy's blond curls were adjusted. It was quite unaccountable that Mrs. Deane, the thinnest and sallowest of all the Miss Dodsons, should have had this child, who might have been taken for Mrs. Tulliver's any day. And Maggie always looked twice as dark as usual when she was by the side of Lucy.

She did to-day, when she and Tom came in from the garden with their father and their uncle Glegg. Maggie had thrown her bonnet off very carelessly, and, coming in with her hair rough as well as out of curl, rushed at once to Lucy, who was standing by her mother's knee. Certainly the contrast between the cousins was conspicuous, and, to superficial eyes, was very much to the disadvantage of Maggie, though a connoisseur might have seen "points" in her which had a higher promise for maturity than Lucy's natty completeness. It was like the contrast between a rough, dark, overgrown puppy and a white kitten. Lucy put up the neatest little rosebud mouth to be kissed: everything about her was neat—her

little round neck, with the row of coral beads; her little straight nose, not at all snubby; her little clear eyebrows, rather darker than her curls, to match her hazel eyes, which looked up with shy pleasure at Maggie, taller by the head, though scarcely a year older. Maggie always looked at Lucy with delight. She was fond of fancying a world where the people never got any larger than children of their own age, and she made the queen of it just like Lucy, with a little crown on her head, and a little sceptre in her hand.… only the queen was Maggie herself in Lucy's form.

"O Lucy," she burst out, after kissing her, "you'll stay with Tom and me, won't you? O kiss her, Tom."

Tom, too, had come up to Lucy, but he was not going to kiss her —no; he came up to her with Maggie, because it seemed easier, on the whole, than saying, "How do you do?" to all those aunts and uncles: he stood looking at nothing in particular, with the blushing, awkward air and semi-smile which are common to shy boys when in company—very much as if they had come into the world by mistake, and found it in a degree of undress that was quite embarrassing.

"Heyday!" said aunt Glegg, with loud emphasis. "Do little boys and gells come into a room without taking notice o' their uncles and aunts? That wasn't the way when *I* was a little gell."

"Go and speak to your aunts and uncles, my dears," said Mrs. Tulliver, looking anxious and melancholy. She wanted to whisper to Maggie a command to go and have her hair brushed.

"Well, and how do you do? And I hope you're good children, are you?" said aunt Glegg, in the same loud emphatic way, as she took their hands, hurting them with her large rings, and kissing their cheeks much against their desire. "Look up, Tom, look up. Boys as go to boarding-schools should hold their heads up. Look at me now." Tom declined that pleasure apparently, for he tried to draw his hand away. "Put your hair behind your ears, Maggie, and keep your frock on your shoulder."

Aunt Glegg always spoke to them in this loud emphatic way, as if she considered them deaf, or perhaps rather idiotic: it was a means, she thought, of making them feel that they were accountable creatures, and might be a salutary check on naughty tendencies. Bessy's children were so spoiled—they'd need have somebody to make them feel their duty.

"Well, my dears," said aunt Pullet, in a compassionate voice, "you grow wonderful fast. I doubt they'll outgrow their strength," she added, looking over their heads with a melancholy expression, at their mother. "I think the gell has too much hair. I'd have it thinned and cut shorter, sister, if I was you: it isn't good for her health. It's that as makes her skin so brown. I shouldn't wonder. Don't you think so, sister Deane?"

"I can't say, I'm sure, sister," said Mrs. Deane, shutting her lips close again, and looking at Maggie with a critical eye.

"No, no," said Mr. Tulliver, "the child's healthy enough—there's nothing ails her. There's red wheat as well as white, for that matter, and some like the dark grain best. But it 'ud be as well if Bessy 'ud have the child's hair cut, so as it 'ud lie smooth."

A dreadful resolve was gathering in Maggie's breast, but it was arrested by the desire to know from her aunt Deane whether she would leave Lucy behind: aunt Deane would hardly ever let Lucy come to see them. After various reasons for refusal, Mrs. Deane appealed to Lucy herself.

"You wouldn't like to stay behind without mother, should you, Lucy?"

"Yes, please, mother," said Lucy, timidly, blushing very pink all over her little neck.

"Well done, Lucy! Let her stay, Mrs. Deane, let her stay," said Mr. Deane, a large but alert-looking man, with a type of physique to be seen in all ranks of English society—bald crown, red whiskers, full forehead, and general solidity without heaviness. You may see noblemen like Mr. Deane, and you may see grocers or day-labourers like him; but the keenness of his brown eyes was less common than

his contour. He held a silver snuff-box very tightly in his hand, and now and then exchanged a pinch with Mr. Tulliver, whose box was only silver-mounted, so that it was naturally a joke between them that Mr. Tulliver wanted to exchange snuff-boxes also. Mr. Deane's box had been given him by the superior partners in the firm to which he belonged, at the same time that they gave him a share in the business, in acknowledgment of his valuable services as manager. No man was thought more highly of in St. Ogg's than Mr. Deane, and some persons were even of opinion that Miss Susan Dodson, who was once held to have made the worst match of all the Dodson sisters, might one day ride in a better carriage, and live in a better house, even than her sister Pullet. There was no knowing where a man would stop, who had got his foot into a great mill-owning, ship-owning business like that of Guest & Co., with a banking concern attached. And Mrs. Deane, as her intimate female friends observed, was proud and "having" enough: *she* wouldn't let her husband stand still in the world for want of spurring.

"Maggie," said Mrs. Tulliver, beckoning Maggie to her, and whispering in her ear, as soon as this point of Lucy's staying was settled, "go and get your hair brushed—do, for shame. I told you not to come in without going to Martha first; you know I did."

"Tom, come out with me," whispered Maggie, pulling his sleeve as she passed him; and Tom followed willingly enough.

"Come up-stairs with me, Tom," she whispered, when they were outside the door. "There's something I want to do before dinner."

"There's no time to play at anything before dinner," said Tom, whose imagination was impatient of any intermediate prospect.

"O, yes, there is time for this—*do* come, Tom."

Tom followed Maggie up-stairs into her mother's room, and saw her go at once to a drawer, from which she took out a large pair of scissors.

"What are they for, Maggie?" said Tom, feeling his curiosity awakened.

Maggie answered by seizing her front locks and cutting them straight across the middle of her forehead.

“O, my buttons, Maggie, you’ll catch it!” exclaimed Tom; “you’d better not cut any more off.”

Snip! went the great scissors again while Tom was speaking; and he couldn’t help feeling it was rather good fun: Maggie would look so queer.

“Here, Tom, cut it behind for me,” said Maggie, excited by her own daring, and anxious to finish the deed.

“You’ll catch it, you know,” said Tom, nodding his head in an admonitory manner, and hesitating a little as he took the scissors.

“Never mind—make haste!” said Maggie, giving a little stamp with her foot. Her cheeks were quite flushed.

The black locks were so thick—nothing could be more tempting to a lad who had already tasted the forbidden pleasure of cutting the pony’s mane. I speak to those who know the satisfaction of making a pair of shears meet through a duly resisting mass of hair. One delicious grinding snip, and then another and another, and the hinder-locks fell heavily on the floor, and Maggie stood cropped in a jagged, uneven manner, but with a sense of clearness and freedom, as if she had emerged from a wood into the open plain.

“O, Maggie,” said Tom, jumping round her, and slapping his knees as he laughed, “O, my buttons, what a queer thing you look! Look at yourself in the glass—you look like the idiot we throw our nut-shells to at school.”

Maggie felt an unexpected pang. She had thought beforehand chiefly of her own deliverance from her teasing hair and teasing remarks about it, and something also of the triumph she should have over her mother and her aunts by this very decided course of action: she didn’t want her hair to look pretty—that was out of the question—she only wanted people to think her a clever little girl, and not to find fault with her. But now, when Tom began to laugh at her, and say she was like the idiot, the affair had quite a new aspect. She looked in the glass, and still Tom laughed and clapped

his hands, and Maggie's flushed cheeks began to pale, and her lips to tremble a little.

"O Maggie, you'll have to go down to dinner directly," said Tom. "O my!"

"Don't laugh at me, Tom," said Maggie, in a passionate tone, with an outburst of angry tears, stamping, and giving him a push.

"Now, then, spitfire!" said Tom. "What did you cut it off for, then? I shall go down: I can smell the dinner going in."

He hurried down-stairs and left poor Maggie to that bitter sense of the irrevocable which was almost an everyday experience of her small soul. She could see clearly enough, now the thing was done, that it was very foolish, and that she should have to hear and think more about her hair than ever; for Maggie rushed to her deeds with passionate impulse, and then saw not only their consequences, but what would have happened if they had not been done, with all the detail and exaggerated circumstance of an active imagination. Tom never did the same sort of foolish things as Maggie, having a wonderful instinctive discernment of what would turn to his advantage or disadvantage; and so it happened, that though he was much more wilful and inflexible than Maggie, his mother hardly ever called him naughty. But if Tom did make a mistake of that sort, he espoused it, and stood by it: he "didn't mind." If he broke the lash of his father's gig-whip by lashing the gate, he couldn't help it —the whip shouldn't have got caught in the hinge. If Tom Tulliver whipped a gate, he was convinced, not that the whipping of gates by all boys was a justifiable act, but that he, Tom Tulliver, was justifiable in whipping that particular gate, and he wasn't going to be sorry. But Maggie, as she stood crying before the glass, felt it impossible that she should go down to dinner and endure the severe eyes and severe words of her aunts, while Tom, and Lucy, and Martha, who waited at table, and perhaps her father and her uncles, would laugh at her,—for if Tom had laughed at her, of course every one else would; and if she had only let her hair alone, she could have sat with Tom and Lucy, and had the apricot pudding and the custard! What could she do but sob? She sat as helpless and

despairing among her black locks as Ajax among the slaughtered sheep. Very trivial, perhaps, this anguish seems to weather-worn mortals who have to think of Christmas bills, dead loves, and broken friendships; but it was not less bitter to Maggie—perhaps it was even more bitter—than what we are fond of calling antithetically the real troubles of mature life. “Ah, my child, you will have real troubles to fret about by-and-by,” is the consolation we have almost all of us had administered to us in our childhood, and have repeated to other children since we have been grown up. We have all of us sobbed so piteously, standing with tiny bare legs above our little socks, when we lost sight of our mother or nurse in some strange place; but we can no longer recall the poignancy of that moment and weep over it, as we do over the remembered sufferings of five or ten years ago. Every one of those keen moments has left its trace, and lives in us still, but such traces have blent themselves irrecoverably with the firmer texture of our youth and manhood; and so it comes that we can look on at the troubles of our children with a smiling disbelief in the reality of their pain. Is there any one who can recover the experience of his childhood, not merely with a memory of what he did and what happened to him, of what he liked and disliked when he was in frock and trousers, but with an intimate penetration, a revived consciousness of what he felt then—when it was so long from one Midsummer to another? what he felt when his schoolfellows shut him out of their game because he would pitch the ball wrong out of mere wilfulness; or on a rainy day in the holidays, when he didn’t know how to amuse himself, and fell from idleness into mischief, from mischief into defiance, and from defiance into sulkiness; or when his mother absolutely refused to let him have a tailed coat that “half,” although every other boy of his age had gone into tails already? Surely if we could recall that early bitterness, and the dim guesses, the strangely perspectiveless conception of life that gave the bitterness its intensity, we should not pooh-pooh the griefs of our children.

“Miss Maggie, you’re to come down this minute,” said Kezia, entering the room hurriedly. “Lawks! what have you been a-doing? I

niver *see* such a fright."

"Don't, Kezia," said Maggie, angrily. "Go away!"

"But I tell you, you're to come down, Miss, this minute: your mother says so," said Kezia, going up to Maggie and taking her by the hand to raise her from the floor.

"Get away, Kezia; I don't want any dinner," said Maggie, resisting Kezia's arm. "I shan't come."

"O, well, I can't stay. I've got to wait at dinner," said Kezia, going out again.

"Maggie, you little silly," said Tom, peeping into the room ten minutes after, "why don't you come and have your dinner? There's lots o' goodies, and mother says you're to come. What are you crying for, you little spooney?"

O, it was dreadful! Tom was so hard and unconcerned; if *he* had been crying on the floor, Maggie would have cried too. And there was the dinner, so nice; and she was *so* hungry. It was very bitter.

But Tom was not altogether hard. He was not inclined to cry, and did not feel that Maggie's grief spoiled his prospect of the sweets; but he went and put his head near her, and said in a lower, comforting tone—

"Won't you come, then, Magsie? Shall I bring you a bit o'pudding when I've had mine?…. and a custard and things?"

"Ye-e-es," said Maggie, beginning to feel life a little more tolerable.

"Very well," said Tom, going away. But he turned again at the door and said, "But you'd better come, you know. There's the dessert—nuts, you know—and cowslip wine."

Maggie's tears had ceased, and she looked reflective as Tom left her. His good nature had taken off the keenest edge of her suffering, and nuts with cowslip wine began to assert their legitimate influence.

Slowly she rose from amongst her scattered locks, and slowly she made her way down-stairs. Then she stood leaning with one

shoulder against the frame of the dining-parlour door, peeping in when it was ajar. She saw Tom and Lucy with an empty chair between them, and there were the custards on a side-table—it was too much. She slipped in and went towards the empty chair. But she had no sooner sat down than she repented, and wished herself back again.

Mrs. Tulliver gave a little scream as she saw her, and felt such a "turn" that she dropt the large gravy-spoon into the dish with the most serious results to the table-cloth. For Kezia had not betrayed the reason of Maggie's refusal to come down, not liking to give her mistress a shock in the moment of carving, and Mrs. Tulliver thought there was nothing worse in question than a fit of perverseness, which was inflicting its own punishment by depriving Maggie of half her dinner.

Mrs. Tulliver's scream made all eyes turn towards the same point as her own, and Maggie's cheeks and ears began to burn, while uncle Glegg, a kind-looking, white-haired old gentleman, said—

"Heyday! what little gell's this—why, I don't know her. Is it some little gell you've picked up in the road, Kezia?"

"Why, she's gone and cut her hair herself," said Mr. Tulliver in an under-tone to Mr. Deane, laughing with much enjoyment. "Did you ever know such a little hussy as it is?"

"Why, little miss, you've made yourself look very funny," said uncle Pullet, and perhaps he never in his life made an observation which was felt to be so lacerating.

"Fie, for shame!" said aunt Glegg, in her loudest, severest tone of reproof. "Little gells as cut their own hair should be whipped and fed on bread-and-water—not come and sit down with their aunts and uncles."

"Ay, ay," said uncle Glegg, meaning to give a playful turn to this denunciation, "she must be sent to jail, I think, and they'll cut the rest of her hair off there, and make it all even."

"She's more like a gypsy nor ever," said aunt Pullet, in a pitying tone; "its very bad luck, sister, as the gell should be so brown—the

boy's fair enough. I doubt it'll stand in her way i' life to be so brown."

"She's a naughty child, as'll break her mother's heart," said Mrs. Tulliver, with the tears in her eyes.

Maggie seemed to be listening to a chorus of reproach and derision. Her first flush came from anger, which gave her a transient power of defiance, and Tom thought she was braving it out, supported by the recent appearance of the pudding and custard. Under this impression, he whispered, "O my! Maggie, I told you you'd catch it." He meant to be friendly, but Maggie felt convinced that Tom was rejoicing in her ignominy. Her feeble power of defiance left her in an instant, her heart swelled, and, getting up from her chair, she ran to her father, hid her face on his shoulder, and burst out into loud sobbing.

"Come, come, my wench," said her father soothingly, putting his arm round her, "never mind; you was i' the right to cut it off if it plagued you; give over crying: father'll take your part."

Delicious words of tenderness! Maggie never forgot any of these moments when her father "took her part;" she kept them in her heart, and thought of them long years after, when every one else said that her father had done very ill by his children.

"How your husband does spoil that child, Bessy!" said Mrs. Glegg, in a loud "aside," to Mrs. Tulliver. "It'll be the ruin of her, if you don't take care. *My* father niver brought his children up so, else we should ha' been a different sort o' family to what we are."

Mrs. Tulliver's domestic sorrows seemed at this moment to have reached the point at which insensibility begins. She took no notice of her sister's remark, but threw back her cap strings and dispensed the pudding, in mute resignation.

With the dessert there came entire deliverance for Maggie, for the children were told they might have their nuts and wine in the summer-house, since the day was so mild, and they scampered out among the budding bushes of the garden with the alacrity of small animals getting from under a burning glass.

Mrs. Tulliver had her special reason for this permission: now the dinner was despatched, and every one's mind disengaged, it was the right moment to communicate Mr. Tulliver's intention concerning Tom, and it would be as well for Tom himself to be absent. The children were used to hear themselves talked of as freely as if they were birds, and could understand nothing, however they might stretch their necks and listen; but on this occasion Mrs. Tulliver manifested an unusual discretion, because she had recently had evidence that the going to school to a clergyman was a sore point with Tom, who looked at it as very much on a par with going to school to a constable. Mrs. Tulliver had a sighing sense that her husband would do as he liked, whatever sister Glegg said, or sister Pullet either, but at least they would not be able to say, if the thing turned out ill, that Bessy had fallen in with her husband's folly without letting her own friends know a word about it.

"Mr. Tulliver," she said, interrupting her husband in his talk with Mr. Deane, "it's time now to tell the children's aunts and uncles what you're thinking of doing with Tom, isn't it?"

"Very well," said Mr. Tulliver, rather sharply, "I've no objections to tell anybody what I mean to do with him. I've settled," he added, looking towards Mr. Glegg and Mr. Deane—"I've settled to send him to a Mr. Stelling, a parson, down at King's Lorton, there—an uncommon clever fellow, I understand—as'll put him up to most things."

There was a rustling demonstration of surprise in the company, such as you may have observed in a country congregation when they hear an allusion to their week-day affairs from the pulpit. It was equally astonishing to the aunts and uncles to find a parson introduced into Mr. Tulliver's family arrangements. As for uncle Pullet, he could hardly have been more thoroughly obfuscated if Mr. Tulliver had said that he was going to send Tom to the Lord Chancellor: for uncle Pullet belonged to that extinct class of British yeomen who, dressed in good broadcloth, paid high rates and taxes, went to church, and ate a particularly good dinner on Sunday, without dreaming that the British constitution in Church and State

had a traceable origin any more than the solar system and the fixed stars. It is melancholy, but true, that Mr. Pullet had the most confused idea of a bishop as a sort of a baronet, who might or might not be a clergyman; and as the rector of his own parish was a man of high family and fortune, the idea that a clergyman could be a schoolmaster was too remote from Mr. Pullet's experience to be readily conceivable. I know it is difficult for people in these instructed times to believe in uncle Pullet's ignorance; but let them reflect on the remarkable results of a great natural faculty under favouring circumstances. And uncle Pullet had a great natural faculty for ignorance. He was the first to give utterance to his astonishment.

"Why, what can you be going to send him to a parson for?" he said, with an amazed twinkling in his eyes, looking at Mr. Glegg and Mr. Deane, to see if they showed any signs of comprehension.

"Why, because the parsons are the best schoolmasters, by what I can make out," said poor Mr. Tulliver, who, in the maze of this puzzling world, laid hold of any clue with great readiness and tenacity. "Jacobs at th' academy's no parson, and he's done very bad by the boy; and I made up my mind, if I sent him to school again, it should be to somebody different to Jacobs. And this Mr. Stelling, by what I can make out, is the sort o' man I want. And I mean my boy to go to him at Midsummer," he concluded, in a tone of decision, tapping his snuff-box and taking a pinch.

"You'll have to pay a swinging half-yearly bill, then, eh, Tulliver? The clergymen have highish notions, in general," said Mr. Deane, taking snuff vigorously, as he always did when wishing to maintain a neutral position.

"What! do you think the parson 'll teach him to know a good sample o' wheat when he sees it, neighbour Tulliver?" said Mr. Glegg, who was fond of his jest; and, having retired from business, felt that it was not only allowable but becoming in him to take a playful view of things.

“Why, you see, I’ve got a plan i’ my head about Tom,” said Mr. Tulliver, pausing after that statement and lifting up his glass.

“Well, if I may be allowed to speak, and it’s seldom as I am,” said Mrs. Glegg, with a tone of bitter meaning, “I should like to know what good is to come to the boy, by bringin’ him up above his fortin.”

“Why,” said Mr. Tulliver, not looking at Mrs. Glegg, but at the male part of his audience, “you see, I’ve made up my mind not to bring Tom up to my own business. I’ve had my thoughts about it all along, and I made up my mind by what I saw with Garnett and *his* son. I mean to put him to some business, as he can go into without capital, and I want to give him an eddication as he’ll be even wi’ the lawyers and folks, and put me up to a notion now an’ then.”

Mrs. Glegg emitted a long sort of guttural sound with closed lips, that smiled in mingled pity and scorn.

“It ’ud be a fine deal better for some people,” she said, after that introductory note, “if they’d let the lawyers alone.”

“Is he at the head of a grammar school, then, this clergyman—such as that at Market Bewley?” said Mr. Deane.

“No—nothing o’ that,” said Mr. Tulliver. “He won’t take more than two or three pupils—and so he’ll have the more time to attend to ’em, you know.”

“Ah, and get his eddication done the sooner: they can’t learn much at a time when there’s so many of ’em,” said uncle Pullet, feeling that he was getting quite an insight into this difficult matter.

“But he’ll want the more pay, I doubt,” said Mr. Glegg.

“Ay, ay, a cool hundred a-year—that’s all,” said Mr. Tulliver, with some pride at his own spirited course. “But then, you know, it’s an investment; Tom’s eddication ’ull be so much capital to him.”

“Ay, there’s something in that,” said Mr. Glegg. “Well, well, neighbour Tulliver, you may be right, you may be right:

‘When land is gone and money’s spent,
Then learning is most excellent.’

I remember seeing those two lines wrote on a window at Buxton. But us that have got no learning had better keep our money, eh, neighbour Pullet?” Mr. Glegg rubbed his knees and looked very pleasant.

“Mr. Glegg, I wonder *at* you,” said his wife. “It’s very unbecoming in a man o’ your age and belongings.”

“What’s unbecoming, Mrs. G.?” said Mr. Glegg, winking pleasantly at the company. “My new blue coat as I’ve got on?”

“I pity your weakness, Mr. Glegg. I say it’s unbecoming to be making a joke when you see your own kin going headlongs to ruin.”

“If you mean me by that,” said Mr. Tulliver, considerably nettled, “you needn’t trouble yourself to fret about me. I can manage my own affairs without troubling other folks.”

“Bless me,” said Mr. Deane, judiciously introducing a new idea, “why, now I come to think of it, somebody said Wakem was going to send *his* son—the deformed lad—to a clergyman, didn’t they, Susan?” (appealing to his wife).

“I can give no account of it, I’m sure,” said Mrs. Deane, closing her lips very tightly again. Mrs. Deane was not a woman to take part in a scene where missiles were flying.

“Well,” said Mr. Tulliver, speaking all the more cheerfully, that Mrs. Glegg might see he didn’t mind her, “if Wakem thinks o’ sending his son to a clergyman, depend on it I shall make no mistake i’ sending Tom to one. Wakem’s as big a scoundrel as Old Harry ever made, but he knows the length of every man’s foot he’s got to deal with. Ay, ay, tell me who’s Wakem’s butcher, and I’ll tell you where to get your meat.”

“But lawyer Wakem’s son’s got a hump-back,” said Mrs. Pullet, who felt as if the whole business had a funereal aspect; “it’s more nat’ral to send *him* to a clergyman.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Glegg, interpreting Mrs. Pullet’s observation with erroneous plausibility, “you must consider that, neighbour Tulliver; Wakem’s son isn’t likely to follow any business. Wakem ’ull make a gentleman of him, poor fellow.”

“Mr. Glegg,” said Mrs. G., in a tone which implied that her indignation would fizz and ooze a little, though she was determined to keep it corked up, “you’d far better hold your tongue. Mr. Tulliver doesn’t want to know your opinion nor mine neither. There’s folks in the world as know better than everybody else.”

“Why, I should think that’s you, if we’re to trust your own tale,” said Mr. Tulliver, beginning to boil up again.

“O, *I* say nothing,” said Mrs. Glegg, sarcastically. “My advice has never been asked, and I don’t give it.”

“It’ll be the first time, then,” said Mr. Tulliver. “It’s the only thing you’re over-ready at giving.”

“I’ve been over-ready at lending, then, if I haven’t been over-ready at giving,” said Mrs. Glegg. “There’s folk I’ve lent money to, as perhaps I shall repent o’ lending money to kin.”

“Come, come, come,” said Mr. Glegg, soothingly. But Mr. Tulliver was not to be hindered of his retort.

“You’ve got a bond for it, I reckon,” he said; “and you’ve had your five per cent, kin or no kin.”

“Sister,” said Mrs. Tulliver, pleadingly, “drink your wine, and let me give you some almonds and raisins.”

“Bessy, I’m sorry for you,” said Mrs. Glegg, very much with the feeling of a cur that seizes the opportunity of diverting his bark towards the man who carries no stick. “It’s poor work, talking o’ almonds and raisins.”

“Lors, sister Glegg, don’t be so quarrelsome,” said Mrs. Pullet, beginning to cry a little. “You may be struck with a fit, getting so red in the face after dinner, and we are but just out o’ mourning, all of us—and all wi’ gowns craped alike and just put by—it’s very bad among sisters.”

“I should think it *is* bad,” said Mrs. Glegg. “Things are come to a fine pass when one sister invites the other to her house o’ purpose to quarrel with her and abuse her.”

“Softly, softly, Jane—be reasonable—be reasonable,” said Mr. Glegg.

But while he was speaking, Mr. Tulliver, who had by no means said enough to satisfy his anger, burst out again,

“Who wants to quarrel with you?” he said. “It’s you as can’t let people alone, but must be gnawing at ’em for ever. *I* should never want to quarrel with any woman, if she kept her place.”

“My place, indeed!” said Mrs. Glegg, getting rather more shrill. “There’s your betters, Mr. Tulliver, as are dead and in their grave, treated me with a different sort o’ respect to what you do—*though* I’ve got a husband as’ll sit by and see me abused by them as ’ud never ha’ had the chance if there hadn’t been them in our family as married worse than they might ha’ done.”

“If you talk o’ that,” said Mr. Tulliver, “my family’s as good as yours—and better, for it hasn’t got a damned ill-tempered woman in it.”

“Well!” said Mrs. Glegg, rising from her chair, “I don’t know whether you think it’s a fine thing to sit by and hear me swore at, Mr. Glegg; but I’m not going to stay a minute longer in this house. You can stay behind, and come home with the gig—and I’ll walk home.”

“Dear heart, dear heart!” said Mr. Glegg in a melancholy tone, as he followed his wife out of the room.

“Mr. Tulliver, how could you talk so?” said Mrs. Tulliver, with the tears in her eyes.

“Let her go,” said Mr. Tulliver, too hot to be damped by any amount of tears. “Let her go, and the sooner the better: she won’t be trying to domineer over *me* again in a hurry.”

“Sister Pullet,” said Mrs. Tulliver helplessly, “do you think it ’ud be any use for you to go after her and try to pacify her?”

“Better not, better not,” said Mr. Deane. “You’ll make it up another day.”

“Then, sisters, shall we go and look at the children?” said Mrs. Tulliver, drying her eyes.

No proposition could have been more seasonable. Mr. Tulliver felt very much as if the air had been cleared of obtrusive flies now the women were out of the room. There were few things he liked better than a chat with Mr. Deane, whose close application to business allowed the pleasure very rarely. Mr. Deane, he considered, was the “knowingest” man of his acquaintance, and he had besides a ready causticity of tongue that made an agreeable supplement to Mr. Tulliver’s own tendency that way, which had remained in rather an inarticulate condition. And now the women were gone, they could carry on their serious talk without frivolous interruption. They could exchange their views concerning the Duke of Wellington, whose conduct in the Catholic Question had thrown such an entirely new light on his character; and speak slightingly of his conduct at the battle of Waterloo, which he would never have won if there hadn’t been a great many Englishmen at his back, not to speak of Blucher and the Prussians, who, as Mr. Tulliver had heard from a person of particular knowledge in that matter, had come up in the very nick of time; though here there was a slight dissidence, Mr. Deane remarking that he was not disposed to give much credit to the Prussians,—the build of their vessels, together with the unsatisfactory character of transactions in Dantzic beer, inclining him to form rather a low view of Prussian pluck generally. Rather beaten on this ground, Mr. Tulliver proceeded to express his fears that the country could never again be what it used to be; but Mr. Deane, attached to a firm of which the returns were on the increase, naturally took a more lively view of the present; and had some details to give concerning the state of the imports, especially in hides and spelter, which soothed Mr. Tulliver’s imagination by throwing into more distant perspective the period when the country would become utterly the prey of Papists and Radicals, and there would be no more chance for honest men.

Uncle Pullet sat by and listened with twinkling eyes to these high matters. He didn't understand politics himself—thought they were a natural gift—but by what he could make out, this Duke of Wellington was no better than he should be.

CHAPTER VIII

Mr. Tulliver Shows His Weaker Side

“Suppose sister Glegg should call her money in—it ’ud be very awkward for you to have to raise five hundred pounds now,” said Mrs. Tulliver to her husband that evening, as she took a plaintive review of the day.

Mrs. Tulliver had lived thirteen years with her husband, yet she retained in all the freshness of her early married life a facility of saying things which drove him in the opposite direction to the one she desired. Some minds are wonderful for keeping their bloom in this way, as a patriarchal gold-fish apparently retains to the last its youthful illusion that it can swim in a straight line beyond the encircling glass. Mrs. Tulliver was an amiable fish of this kind, and, after running her head against the same resisting medium for thirteen years, would go at it again to-day with undulled alacrity.

This observation of hers tended directly to convince Mr. Tulliver that it would not be at all awkward for him to raise five hundred pounds; and when Mrs. Tulliver became rather pressing to know *how* he would raise it without mortgaging the mill and the house which he had said he never *would* mortgage, since nowadays people were none so ready to lend money without security, Mr. Tulliver, getting warm, declared that Mrs. Glegg might do as she liked about calling in her money—he should pay it in, whether or not. He was not going to be beholden to his wife’s sisters. When a man had married into a family where there was a whole litter of women, he might have plenty to put up with if he chose. But Mr. Tulliver did *not* choose.

Mrs. Tulliver cried a little in a trickling quiet way as she put on her nightcap; but presently sank into a comfortable sleep, lulled by the thought that she would talk everything over with her sister Pullet to-morrow, when she was to take the children to Garum Firs

to tea. Not that she looked forward to any distinct issue from that talk; but it seemed impossible that past events should be so obstinate as to remain unmodified when they were complained against.

Her husband lay awake rather longer, for he too was thinking of a visit he would pay on the morrow; and his ideas on the subject were not of so vague and soothing a kind as those of his amiable partner.

Mr. Tulliver, when under the influence of a strong feeling, had a promptitude in action that may seem inconsistent with that painful sense of the complicated puzzling nature of human affairs under which his more dispassionate deliberations were conducted; but it is really not improbable that there was a direct relation between these apparently contradictory phenomena, since I have observed that for getting a strong impression that a skein is tangled, there is nothing like snatching hastily at a single thread. It was owing to this promptitude that Mr. Tulliver was on horseback soon after dinner the next day (he was not dyspeptic) on his way to Basset to see his sister Moss and her husband. For having made up his mind irrevocably that he would pay Mrs. Glegg her loan of five hundred pounds, it naturally occurred to him that he had a promissory note for three hundred pounds lent to his brother-in-law Moss, and if the said brother-in-law could manage to pay in the money within a given time, it would go far to lessen the fallacious air of inconvenience which Mr. Tulliver's spirited step might have worn in the eyes of weak people who require to know precisely *how* a thing is to be done before they are strongly confident that it will be easy.

For Mr. Tulliver was in a position neither new nor striking, but, like other everyday things, sure to have a cumulative effect that will be felt in the long run: he was held to be a much more substantial man than he really was. And as we are all apt to believe what the world believes about us, it was his habit to think of failure and ruin with the same sort of remote pity with which a spare long-necked man hears that his plethoric short-necked neighbour is stricken with apoplexy. He had been always used to hear pleasant jokes about his advantages as a man who worked his own mill, and owned a pretty

bit of land; and these jokes naturally kept up his sense that he was a man of considerable substance. They gave a pleasant flavour to his glass on a market-day, and if it had not been for the recurrence of half-yearly payments, Mr. Tulliver would really have forgotten that there was a mortgage of two thousand pounds on his very desirable freehold. That was not altogether his own fault, since one of the thousand pounds was his sister's fortune, which he had to pay on her marriage; and a man who has neighbours that *will* go to law with him, is not likely to pay off his mortgages, especially if he enjoys the good opinion of acquaintances who want to borrow a hundred pounds on security too lofty to be represented by parchment. Our friend Mr. Tulliver had a good-natured fibre in him, and did not like to give harsh refusals even to a sister, who had not only come into the world in that superfluous way characteristic of sisters, creating a necessity for mortgages, but had quite thrown herself away in marriage, and had crowned her mistakes by having an eighth baby. On this point Mr. Tulliver was conscious of being a little weak; but he apologised to himself by saying that poor Gritty had been a good-looking wench before she married Moss—he would sometimes say this even with a slight tremulousness in his voice. But this morning he was in a mood more becoming a man of business, and in the course of his ride along the Basset lanes, with their deep ruts,—lying so far away from a market-town that the labour of drawing produce and manure was enough to take away the best part of the profits on such poor land as that parish was made of,—he got up a due amount of irritation against Moss as a man without capital, who, if murrain and blight were abroad, was sure to have his share of them, and who, the more you tried to help him out of the mud, would sink the further in. It would do him good rather than harm, now, if he were obliged to raise this three hundred pounds: it would make him look about him better, and not act so foolishly about his wool this year as he did the last: in fact, Mr. Tulliver had been too easy with his brother-in-law, and because he had let the interest run on for two years, Moss was likely enough to think that he should never be troubled about the principal. But Mr. Tulliver was determined not to encourage such shuffling people any longer; and

a ride along the Basset lanes was not likely to enervate a man's resolution by softening his temper. The deep-trodden hoof-marks, made in the muddiest days of winter, gave him a shake now and then which suggested a rash but stimulating snarl at the father of lawyers, who, whether by means of his hoof or otherwise, had doubtless something to do with this state of the roads; and the abundance of foul land and neglected fences that met his eye, though they made no part of his brother Moss's farm, strongly contributed to his dissatisfaction with that unlucky agriculturist. If this wasn't Moss's fallow, it might have been: Basset was all alike; it was a beggarly parish in Mr. Tulliver's opinion, and his opinion was certainly not groundless. Basset had a poor soil, poor roads, a poor non-resident landlord, a poor non-resident vicar, and rather less than half a curate, also poor. If any one strongly impressed with the power of the human mind to triumph over circumstances, will contend that the parishioners of Basset might nevertheless have been a very superior class of people, I have nothing to urge against that abstract proposition; I only know that, in point of fact, the Basset mind was in strict keeping with its circumstances. The muddy lanes, green or clayey, that seemed to the unaccustomed eye to lead nowhere but into each other, did really lead, with patience, to a distant high-road; but there were many feet in Basset which they led more frequently to a centre of dissipation, spoken of formally as the "Markis o' Granby," but among intimates as "Dickison's." A large low room with a sanded floor, a cold scent of tobacco, modified by undetected beer-dregs, Mr. Dickison leaning against the doorpost with a melancholy pimpled face, looking as irrelevant to the daylight as a last night's guttered candle—all this may not seem a very seductive form of temptation; but the majority of men in Basset found it fatally alluring when encountered on their road towards four o'clock on a wintry afternoon; and if any wife in Basset wished to indicate that her husband was not a pleasure-seeking man, she could hardly do it more emphatically than by saying that he didn't spend a shilling at Dickison's from one Whitsuntide to another. Mrs. Moss had said so of *her* husband more than once, when her brother was in a mood to find fault with him, as he certainly was to-day.

And nothing could be less pacifying to Mr. Tulliver than the behaviour of the farmyard gate, which he no sooner attempted to push open with his riding-stick, than it acted as gates without the upper hinge are known to do, to the peril of shins, whether equine or human. He was about to get down and lead his horse through the damp dirt of the hollow farmyard, shadowed drearily by the large half-timbered buildings, up to the long line of tumble-down dwelling-house standing on a raised causeway; but the timely appearance of a cowboy saved him that frustration of a plan he had determined on—namely, not to get down from his horse during this visit. If a man means to be hard, let him keep in his saddle and speak from that height, above the level of pleading eyes, and with the command of a distant horizon. Mrs. Moss heard the sound of the horse's feet, and, when her brother rode up, was already outside the kitchen door, with a half-weary smile on her face, and a black-eyed baby in her arms. Mrs. Moss's face bore a faded resemblance to her brother's; baby's little fat hand, pressed against her cheek, seemed to show more strikingly that the cheek was faded.

"Brother, I'm glad to see you," she said, in an affectionate tone. "I didn't look for you to-day. How do you do?"

"Oh,… pretty well, Mrs. Moss … pretty well," answered the brother, with cool deliberation, as if it were rather too forward of her to ask that question. She knew at once that her brother was not in a good humour: he never called her Mrs. Moss except when he was angry, and when they were in company. But she thought it was in the order of nature that people who were poorly off should be snubbed. Mrs. Moss did not take her stand on the equality of the human race: she was a patient, prolific, loving-hearted woman.

"Your husband isn't in the house, I suppose?" added Mr. Tulliver, after a grave pause, during which four children had run out, like chickens whose mother has been suddenly in eclipse behind the hencoop.

"No," said Mrs. Moss, "but he's only in the potato-field yonders. Georgy, run to the Far Close in a minute, and tell father your uncle's come. You'll get down, brother, won't you, and take something?"

“No, no; I can’t get down. I must be going home again directly,” said Mr. Tulliver, looking at the distance.

“And how’s Mrs. Tulliver and the children?” said Mrs. Moss, humbly, not daring to press her invitation.

“Oh … pretty well. Tom’s going to a new school at Midsummer—a deal of expense to me. It’s bad work for me, lying out o’ my money.”

“I wish you’d be so good as let the children come and see their cousins some day. My little uns want to see their cousin Maggie, so as never was. And me her god-mother, and so fond of her—there’s nobody ’ud make a bigger fuss with her, according to what they’ve got. And I know she likes to come, for she’s a loving child, and how quick and clever she is, to be sure!”

If Mrs. Moss had been one of the most astute women in the world, instead of being one of the simplest, she could have thought of nothing more likely to propitiate her brother than this praise of Maggie. He seldom found any one volunteering praise of “the little wench:” it was usually left entirely to himself to insist on her merits. But Maggie always appeared in the most amiable light at her aunt Moss’s: it was her Alsatia, where she was out of the reach of law—if she upset anything, dirtied her shoes, or tore her frock, these things were matters of course at her aunt Moss’s. In spite of himself, Mr. Tulliver’s eyes got milder, and he did not look away from his sister, as he said,

“Ay: she’s fonder o’ you than o’ the other aunts, I think. She takes after our family: not a bit of her mother’s in her.”

“Moss says she’s just like what I used to be,” said Mrs. Moss, “though I was never so quick and fond o’ the books. But I think my Lizzy’s like her—*she’s* sharp. Come here, Lizzy, my dear, and let your uncle see you: he hardly knows you; you grow so fast.”

Lizzy, a black-eyed child of seven, looked very shy when her mother drew her forward, for the small Mosses were much in awe of their uncle from Dorlcote Mill. She was inferior enough to Maggie in

fire and strength of expression, to make the resemblance between the two entirely flattering to Mr. Tulliver's fatherly love.

"Ay, they're a bit alike," he said, looking kindly at the little figure in the soiled pinafore. "They both take after our mother. You've got enough o' gells, Gritty," he added, in a tone half compassionate, half reproachful.

"Four of 'em, bless 'em," said Mrs. Moss, with a sigh, stroking Lizzy's hair on each side of her forehead; "as many as there's boys. They've got a brother a-piece."

"Ah, but they must turn out and fend for themselves," said Mr. Tulliver, feeling that his severity was relaxing, and trying to brace it by throwing out a wholesome hint. "They mustn't look to hanging on their brothers."

"No: but I hope their brothers 'ull love the poor things, and remember they came o' one father and mother: the lads 'ull never be the poorer for that," said Mrs. Moss, flashing out with hurried timidity, like a half-smothered fire.

Mr. Tulliver gave his horse a little stroke on the flank, then checked it, and said, angrily, "Stand still with you!" much to the astonishment of that innocent animal.

"And the more there is of 'em, the more they must love one another," Mrs. Moss went on, looking at her children with a didactic purpose. But she turned towards her brother again to say, "Not but what I hope your boy 'ull allays be good to his sister, though there's but two of 'em, like you and me, brother."

That arrow went straight to Mr. Tulliver's heart. He had not a rapid imagination, but the thought of Maggie was very near to him, and he was not long in seeing his relation to his own sister side by side with Tom's relation to Maggie. Would the little wench ever be poorly off, and Tom rather hard upon her?

"Ay, ay, Gritty," said the miller, with a new softness in his tone; "but I've allays done what I could for you," he added, as if vindicating himself from a reproach.

“I’m not denying that, brother, and I’m noways ungrateful,” said poor Mrs. Moss, too fagged by toil and children to have strength left for any pride. “But here’s the father. What a while you’ve been, Moss!”

“While, do you call it?” said Mr. Moss, feeling out of breath and injured. “I’ve been running all the way. Won’t you ’light, Mr. Tulliver?”

“Well, I’ll just get down and have a bit o’ talk with you in the garden,” said Mr. Tulliver, thinking that he should be more likely to show a due spirit of resolve if his sister were not present.

He got down, and passed with Mr. Moss into the garden, towards an old yew-tree arbour, while his sister stood tapping her baby on the back, and looking wistfully after them.

Their entrance into the yew-tree arbour surprised several fowls that were recreating themselves by scratching deep holes in the dusty ground, and at once took flight with much pother and cackling. Mr. Tulliver sat down on the bench, and tapping the ground curiously here and there with his stick, as if he suspected some hollowness, opened the conversation by observing, with something like a snarl in his tone—

“Why, you’ve got wheat again in that Corner Close, I see; and never a bit o’ dressing on it. You’ll do no good with it this year.”

Mr. Moss, who, when he married Miss Tulliver, had been regarded as the buck of Basset, now wore a beard nearly a week old, and had the depressed, unexpectant air of a machine-horse. He answered in a patient-grumbling tone, “Why, poor farmers like me must do as they can: they must leave it to them as have got money to play with, to put half as much into the ground as they mean to get out of it.”

“I don’t know who should have money to play with, if it isn’t them as can borrow money without paying interest,” said Mr. Tulliver, who wished to get into a slight quarrel; it was the most natural and easy introduction to calling in money.

“I know I’m behind with the interest,” said Mr. Moss, “but I was so unlucky wi’ the wool last year; and what with the Missis being

laid up so, things have gone awk'arder nor usual."

"Ay," snarled Mr. Tulliver, "there's folks as things 'ull allays go awk'ard with: empty sacks 'ull never stand upright."

"Well, I don't know what fault you've got to find wi' me, Mr. Tulliver," said Mr. Moss, deprecatingly; "I know there isn't a day-labourer works harder."

"What's the use o' that," said Mr. Tulliver, sharply, "when a man marries, and's got no capital to work his farm but his wife's bit o' fortin? I was against it from the first; but you'd neither of you listen to me. And I can't lie out o' my money any longer, for I've got to pay five hundred o' Mrs. Glegg's, and there'll be Tom an expense to me—I should find myself short, even saying I'd got back all as is my own. You must look about and see how you can pay me the three hundred pound."

"Well, if that's what you mean," said Mr. Moss, looking blankly before him, "we'd better be sold up, and ha' done with it; I must part wi' every head o' stock I've got, to pay you and the landlord too."

Poor relations are undeniably irritating—their existence is so entirely uncalled for on our part, and they are almost always very faulty people. Mr. Tulliver had succeeded in getting quite as much irritated with Mr. Moss as he had desired, and he was able to say angrily, rising from his seat—

"Well, you must do as you can. *I* can't find money for everybody else as well as myself. I must look to my own business and my own family. I can't lie out o' my money any longer. You must raise it as quick as you can."

Mr. Tulliver walked abruptly out of the arbour as he uttered the last sentence, and, without looking round at Mr. Moss, went on to the kitchen door, where the eldest boy was holding his horse, and his sister was waiting in a state of wondering alarm, which was not without its alleviations, for baby was making pleasant gurgling sounds, and performing a great deal of finger practice on the faded face. Mrs. Moss had eight children, but could never overcome her

regret that the twins had not lived. Mr. Moss thought their removal was not without its consolations. “Won’t you come in, brother?” she said, looking anxiously at her husband, who was walking slowly up, while Mr. Tulliver had his foot already in the stirrup.

“No, no; good-bye,” said he, turning his horse’s head, and riding away.

No man could feel more resolute till he got outside the yardgate, and a little way along the deep-rutted lane; but before he reached the next turning, which would take him out of sight of the dilapidated farm-buildings, he appeared to be smitten by some sudden thought. He checked his horse, and made it stand still in the same spot for two or three minutes, during which he turned his head from side to side in a melancholy way, as if he were looking at some painful object on more sides than one. Evidently, after his fit of promptitude, Mr. Tulliver was relapsing into the sense that this is a puzzling world. He turned his horse, and rode slowly back, giving vent to the climax of feeling which had determined this movement by saying aloud, as he struck his horse, “Poor little wench! she’ll have nobody but Tom, belike, when I’m gone.”

Mr. Tulliver’s return into the yard was descried by several young Mosses, who immediately ran in with the exciting news to their mother, so that Mrs. Moss was again on the door-step when her brother rode up. She had been crying, but was rocking baby to sleep in her arms now, and made no ostentatious show of sorrow as her brother looked at her, but merely said—

“The father’s gone to the field again, if you want him, brother.”

“No, Gritty, no,” said Mr. Tulliver, in a gentle tone. “Don’t you fret—that’s all—I’ll make a shift without the money a bit—only you must be as clever and contriving as you can.”

Mrs. Moss’s tears came again at this unexpected kindness, and she could say nothing.

“Come, come!—the little wench shall come and see you. I’ll bring her and Tom some day before he goes to school. You mustn’t fret … I’ll allays be a good brother to you.”

“Thank you for that word, brother,” said Mrs. Moss, drying her tears; then turning to Lizzy, she said, “Run now, and fetch the coloured egg for cousin Maggie.” Lizzy ran in, and quickly reappeared with a small paper parcel.

“It’s boiled hard, brother, and coloured with thrums—very pretty: it was done o’ purpose for Maggie. Will you please to carry it in your pocket?”

“Ay, ay,” said Mr. Tulliver, putting it carefully in his side-pocket. “Good-bye.”

And so the respectable miller returned along the Basset lanes rather more puzzled than before as to ways and means, but still with the sense of a danger escaped. It had come across his mind that if he were hard upon his sister, it might somehow tend to make Tom hard upon Maggie at some distant day, when her father was no longer there to take her part; for simple people, like our friend Mr. Tulliver, are apt to clothe unimpeachable feelings in erroneous ideas, and this was his confused way of explaining to himself that his love and anxiety for “the little wench” had given him a new sensibility towards his sister.

CHAPTER IX

To Garum Firs

While the possible troubles of Maggie's future were occupying her father's mind, she herself was tasting only the bitterness of the present. Childhood has no forebodings; but then, it is soothed by no memories of outlived sorrow.

The fact was, the day had begun ill with Maggie. The pleasure of having Lucy to look at, and the prospect of the afternoon visit to Garum Firs, where she would hear uncle Pullet's musical box, had been marred as early as eleven o'clock by the advent of the hairdresser from St. Ogg's, who had spoken in the severest terms of the condition in which he had found her hair, holding up one jagged lock after another and saying, "See here! tut—tut—tut!" in a tone of mingled disgust and pity, which to Maggie's imagination was equivalent to the strongest expression of public opinion. Mr. Rappit, the hairdresser, with his well-anointed coronal locks tending wavily upward, like the simulated pyramid of flame on a monumental urn, seemed to her at that moment the most formidable of her contemporaries, into whose street at St. Ogg's she would carefully refrain from entering through the rest of her life.

Moreover, the preparation for a visit being always a serious affair in the Dodson family, Martha was enjoined to have Mrs. Tulliver's room ready an hour earlier than usual, that the laying-out of the best clothes might not be deferred till the last moment, as was sometimes the case in families of lax views, where the ribbon-strings were never rolled up, where there was little or no wrapping in silver paper, and where the sense that the Sunday clothes could be got at quite easily produced no shock to the mind. Already, at twelve o'clock, Mrs. Tulliver had on her visiting costume, with a protective apparatus of brown holland, as if she had been a piece of satin furniture in danger of flies; Maggie was frowning and twisting her

shoulders, that she might if possible shrink away from the prickliest of tuckers, while her mother was remonstrating, “Don’t, Maggie, my dear—don’t make yourself so ugly!” and Tom’s cheeks were looking particularly brilliant as a relief to his best blue suit, which he wore with becoming calmness; having, after a little wrangling, effected what was always the one point of interest to him in his toilette—he had transferred all the contents of his everyday pockets to those actually in wear.

As for Lucy, she was just as pretty and neat as she had been yesterday: no accidents ever happened to her clothes, and she was never uncomfortable in them, so that she looked with wondering pity at Maggie pouting and writhing under the exasperating tucker. Maggie would certainly have torn it off, if she had not been checked by the remembrance of her recent humiliation about her hair: as it was, she confined herself to fretting and twisting, and behaving peevishly about the card-houses which they were allowed to build till dinner, as a suitable amusement for boys and girls in their best clothes. Tom could build perfect pyramids of houses; but Maggie’s would never bear the laying on of the roof:—it was always so with the things that Maggie made; and Tom had deduced the conclusion that no girls could ever make anything. But it happened that Lucy proved wonderfully clever at building: she handled the cards so lightly, and moved so gently, that Tom condescended to admire her houses as well as his own, the more readily because she had asked him to teach her. Maggie, too, would have admired Lucy’s houses, and would have given up her own unsuccessful building to contemplate them, without ill-temper, if her tucker had not made her peevish and if Tom had not inconsiderately laughed when her houses fell, and told her she was “a stupid.”

“Don’t laugh at me, Tom!” she burst out, angrily; “I’m not a stupid. I know a great many things you don’t.”

“O, I daresay, Miss Spitfire! I’d never be such a cross thing as you —making faces like that. Lucy doesn’t do so. I like Lucy better than you: *I* wish Lucy was *my* sister.”

“Then it’s very wicked and cruel of you to wish so,” said Maggie, starting up hurriedly from her place on the floor, and upsetting Tom’s wonderful pagoda. She really did not mean it, but the circumstantial evidence was against her, and Tom turned white with anger, but said nothing: he would have struck her, only he knew it was cowardly to strike a girl, and Tom Tulliver was quite determined he would never do anything cowardly.

Maggie stood in dismay and terror, while Tom got up from the floor and walked away, pale, from the scattered ruins of his pagoda, and Lucy looked on mutely, like a kitten pausing from its lapping.

“O Tom,” said Maggie, at last, going half-way towards him, “I didn’t mean to knock it down—indeed, indeed I didn’t.”

Tom took no notice of her, but took, instead, two or three hard peas out of his pocket, and shot them with his thumb-nail against the window—vaguely at first, but presently with the distinct aim of hitting a superannuated blue-bottle which was exposing its imbecility in the spring sunshine, clearly against the views of Nature, who had provided Tom and the peas for the speedy destruction of this weak individual.

Thus the morning had been made heavy to Maggie, and Tom’s persistent coldness to her all through their walk spoiled the fresh air and sunshine for her. He called Lucy to look at the half-built bird’s nest without caring to show it Maggie, and peeled a willow switch for Lucy and himself, without offering one to Maggie. Lucy had said, “Maggie, shouldn’t *you* like one?” but Tom was deaf.

Still the sight of the peacock opportunely spreading his tail on the stackyard wall, just as they reached Garum Firs, was enough to divert the mind temporarily from personal grievances. And this was only the beginning of beautiful sights at Garum Firs. All the farmyard life was wonderful there—bantams, speckled and topknotted; Friesland hens, with their feathers all turned the wrong way; Guinea-fowls that flew and screamed and dropped their pretty-spotted feathers; pouter-pigeons and a tame magpie; nay, a goat, and a wonderful brindled dog, half mastiff half bull-dog, as large as

a lion. Then there were white railings and white gates all about, and glittering weathercocks of various design, and garden-walks paved with pebbles in beautiful patterns—nothing was quite common at Garum Firs: and Tom thought that the unusual size of the toads there was simply due to the general unusualness which characterised uncle Pullet's possessions as a gentleman farmer. Toads who paid rent were naturally leaner. As for the house, it was not less remarkable: it had a receding centre, and two wings with battlemented turrets, and was covered with glittering white stucco.

Uncle Pullet had seen the expected party approaching from the window, and made haste to unbar and unchain the front door, kept always in this fortified condition from fear of tramps, who might be supposed to know of the glass-case of stuffed birds in the hall, and to contemplate rushing in and carrying it away on their heads. Aunt Pullet, too, appeared at the doorway, and as soon as her sister was within hearing said, "Stop the children, for God's sake, Bessy—don't let 'em come up the door-steps: Sally's bringing the old mat and the duster, to rub their shoes."

Mrs. Pullet's front-door mats were by no means intended to wipe shoes on: the very scraper had a deputy to do its dirty work. Tom rebelled particularly against this shoe-wiping, which he always considered in the light of an indignity to his sex. He felt it as the beginning of the disagreeables incident to a visit at aunt Pullet's, where he had once been compelled to sit with towels wrapped round his boots; a fact which may serve to correct the too hasty conclusion that a visit to Garum Firs must have been a great treat to a young gentleman fond of animals—fond, that is, of throwing stones at them.

The next disagreeable was confined to his feminine companions: it was the mounting of the polished oak stairs, which had very handsome carpets rolled up and laid by in a spare bedroom, so that the ascent of these glossy steps might have served, in barbarous times, as a trial by ordeal from which none but the most spotless virtue could have come off with unbroken limbs. Sophy's weakness about these polished stairs was always a subject of bitter

remonstrance on Mrs. Glegg's part; but Mrs. Tulliver ventured on no comment, only thinking to herself it was a mercy when she and the children were safe on the landing.

"Mrs. Gray has sent home my new bonnet, Bessy," said Mrs. Pullet, in a pathetic tone, as Mrs. Tulliver adjusted her cap.

"Has she, sister?" said Mrs. Tulliver, with an air of much interest. "And how do you like it?"

"It's apt to make a mess with clothes, taking 'em out and putting 'em in again," said Mrs. Pullet, drawing a bunch of keys from her pocket and looking at them earnestly, "but it 'ud be a pity for you to go away without seeing it. There's no knowing what may happen."

Mrs. Pullet shook her head slowly at this last serious consideration, which determined her to single out a particular key.

"I'm afraid it'll be troublesome to you getting it out, sister," said Mrs. Tulliver, "but I *should* like to see what sort of a crown she's made you."

Mrs. Pullet rose with a melancholy air and unlocked one wing of a very bright wardrobe, where you may have hastily supposed she would find the new bonnet. Not at all. Such a supposition could only have arisen from a too superficial acquaintance with the habits of the Dodson family. In this wardrobe Mrs. Pullet was seeking something small enough to be hidden among layers of linen—it was a door-key.

"You must come with me into the best room," said Mrs. Pullet.

"May the children come too, sister?" inquired Mrs. Tulliver, who saw that Maggie and Lucy were looking rather eager.

"Well," said aunt Pullet, reflectively, "it'll perhaps be safer for 'em to come—they'll be touching something if we leave 'em behind."

So they went in procession along the bright and slippery corridor, dimly lighted by the semi-lunar top of the window which rose above the closed shutter: it was really quite solemn. Aunt Pullet paused and unlocked a door which opened on something still more solemn than the passage: a darkened room, in which the outer light,

entering feebly, showed what looked like the corpses of furniture in white shrouds. Everything that was not shrouded stood with its legs upwards. Lucy laid hold of Maggie's frock, and Maggie's heart beat rapidly.

Aunt Pullet half-opened the shutter and then unlocked the wardrobe, with a melancholy deliberateness which was quite in keeping with the funereal solemnity of the scene. The delicious scent of rose-leaves that issued from the wardrobe, made the process of taking out sheet after sheet of silver paper quite pleasant to assist at, though the sight of the bonnet at last was an anticlimax to Maggie, who would have preferred something more strikingly preternatural. But few things could have been more impressive to Mrs. Tulliver. She looked all round it in silence for some moments, and then said emphatically, "Well, sister, I'll never speak against the full crowns again!"

It was a great concession, and Mrs. Pullet felt it: she felt something was due to it.

"You'd like to see it on, sister?" she said, sadly. "I'll open the shutter a bit further."

"Well, if you don't mind taking off your cap, sister," said Mrs. Tulliver.

Mrs. Pullet took off her cap, displaying the brown silk scalp with a jutting promontory of curls which was common to the more mature and judicious women of those times, and, placing the bonnet on her head, turned slowly round, like a draper's lay-figure, that Mrs. Tulliver might miss no point of view.

"I've sometimes thought there's a loop too much o' ribbon on this left side, sister; what do you think?" said Mrs. Pullet.

Mrs. Tulliver looked earnestly at the point indicated, and turned her head on one side. "Well, I think it's best as it is; if you meddled with it, sister, you might repent."

"That's true," said aunt Pullet, taking off the bonnet and looking at it contemplatively.

“How much might she charge you for that bonnet, sister?” said Mrs. Tulliver, whose mind was actively engaged on the possibility of getting a humble imitation of this *chef-d’oeuvre* made from a piece of silk she had at home.

Mrs. Pullet screwed up her mouth and shook her head, and then whispered, “Pullet pays for it; he said I was to have the best bonnet at Garum Church, let the next best be whose it would.”

She began slowly to adjust the trimmings in preparation for returning it to its place in the wardrobe, and her thoughts seemed to have taken a melancholy turn, for she shook her head.

“Ah,” she said at last, “I may never wear it twice, sister; who knows?”

“Don’t talk o’ that, sister,” answered Mrs. Tulliver. “I hope you’ll have your health this summer.”

“Ah! but there may come a death in the family, as there did soon after I had my green satin bonnet. Cousin Abbott may go, and we can’t think o’ wearing crape less nor half a year for him.”

“That *would* be unlucky,” said Mrs. Tulliver, entering thoroughly into the possibility of an inopportune decease. “There’s never so much pleasure i’ wearing a bonnet the second year, especially when the crowns are so chancy—never two summers alike.”

“Ah, it’s the way i’ this world,” said Mrs. Pullet, returning the bonnet to the wardrobe and locking it up. She maintained a silence characterised by head-shaking, until they had all issued from the solemn chamber and were in her own room again. Then, beginning to cry, she said, “Sister, if you should never see that bonnet again till I’m dead and gone, you’ll remember I showed it you this day.”

Mrs. Tulliver felt that she ought to be affected, but she was a woman of sparse tears, stout and healthy—she couldn’t cry so much as her sister Pullet did, and had often felt her deficiency at funerals. Her effort to bring tears into her eyes issued in an odd contraction of her face. Maggie, looking on attentively, felt that there was some painful mystery about her aunt’s bonnet which she was considered too young to understand; indignantly conscious, all the while, that

she could have understood that, as well as everything else, if she had been taken into confidence.

When they went down, uncle Pullet observed with some acumen, that he reckoned the missis had been showing her bonnet—that was what had made them so long up-stairs. With Tom the interval had seemed still longer, for he had been seated in irksome constraint on the edge of a sofa directly opposite his uncle Pullet, who regarded him with twinkling grey eyes, and occasionally addressed him as "Young sir."

"Well, young sir, what do you learn at school?" was a standing question with uncle Pullet; whereupon Tom always looked sheepish, rubbed his hands across his face and answered, "I don't know." It was altogether so embarrassing to be seated *tête-à-tête* with uncle Pullet, that Tom could not even look at the prints on the walls, or the fly-cages, or the wonderful flowerpots; he saw nothing but his uncle's gaiters. Not that Tom was in awe of his uncle's mental superiority; indeed, he had made up his mind that he didn't want to be a gentleman farmer, because he shouldn't like to be such a thin-legged silly fellow as his uncle Pullet—a mollycoddle, in fact. A boy's sheepishness is by no means a sign of overmastering reverence; and while you are making encouraging advances to him under the idea that he is overwhelmed by a sense of your age and wisdom, ten to one he is thinking you extremely queer. The only consolation I can suggest to you is, that the Greek boys probably thought the same of Aristotle. It is only when you have mastered a restive horse, or thrashed a drayman, or have got a gun in your hand, that these shy juniors feel you to be a truly admirable and enviable character. At least, I am quite sure of Tom Tulliver's sentiments on these points. In very tender years, when he still wore a lace border under his outdoor cap, he was often observed peeping through the bars of a gate and making minatory gestures with his small fore-finger while he scolded the sheep with an inarticulate burr, intended to strike terror into their astonished minds; indicating thus early that desire for mastery over the inferior animals, wild and domestic, including cockchafers, neighbours'

dogs, and small sisters, which in all ages has been an attribute of so much promise for the fortunes of our race. Now Mr. Pullet never rode anything taller than a low pony, and was the least predatory of men, considering fire-arms dangerous, as apt to go off of themselves by nobody's particular desire. So that Tom was not without strong reasons when, in confidential talk with a chum, he had described uncle Pullet as a nincompoop, taking care at the same time to observe that he was a very "rich fellow."

The only alleviating circumstance in a *tête-à-tête* with uncle Pullet was that he kept a variety of lozenges and peppermint drops about his person, and when at a loss for conversation, he filled up the void by proposing a mutual solace of this kind.

"Do you like peppermints, young sir?" required only a tacit answer when it was accompanied by a presentation of the article in question.

The appearance of the little girls suggested to uncle Pullet the further solace of small sweet-cakes, of which he also kept a stock under lock and key for his own private eating on wet days; but the three children had no sooner got the tempting delicacy between their fingers, than aunt Pullet desired them to abstain from eating it till the tray and the plates came, since with those crisp cakes they would make the floor "all over" crumbs. Lucy didn't mind that much, for the cake was so pretty, she thought it was rather a pity to eat it; but Tom, watching his opportunity while the elders were talking, hastily stowed it in his mouth at two bites, and chewed it furtively. As for Maggie, becoming fascinated, as usual, by a print of Ulysses and Nausicaa, which uncle Pullet had bought as a "pretty Scripture thing," she presently let fall her cake, and in an unlucky movement crushed it beneath her foot—a source of so much agitation to aunt Pullet and conscious disgrace to Maggie, that she began to despair of hearing the musical snuff-box to-day, till, after some reflection, it occurred to her that Lucy was in high favour enough to venture on asking for a tune. So she whispered to Lucy, and Lucy, who always did what she was desired to do, went up

quietly to her uncle's knee, and, blushing all over her neck while she fingered her necklace, said, "Will you please play us a tune, uncle?"

Lucy thought it was by reason of some exceptional talent in uncle Pullet that the snuff-box played such beautiful tunes, and indeed the thing was viewed in that light by the majority of his neighbours in Garum. Mr. Pullet had *bought* the box, to begin with, and he understood winding it up, and knew which tune it was going to play beforehand; altogether, the possession of this unique "piece of music" was a proof that Mr. Pullet's character was not of that entire nullity which might otherwise have been attributed to it. But uncle Pullet, when entreated to exhibit his accomplishment, never depreciated it by a too ready consent. "We'll see about it," was the answer he always gave, carefully abstaining from any sign of compliance till a suitable number of minutes had passed. Uncle Pullet had a programme for all great social occasions, and in this way fenced himself in from much painful confusion and perplexing freedom of will.

Perhaps the suspense did heighten Maggie's enjoyment when the fairy tune began: for the first time she quite forgot that she had a load on her mind—that Tom was angry with her; and by the time "Hush, ye pretty warbling choir," had been played, her face wore that bright look of happiness, while she sat immovable with her hands clasped, which sometimes comforted her mother with the sense that Maggie could look pretty now and then, in spite of her brown skin. But when the magic music ceased, she jumped up, and, running towards Tom, put her arm round his neck and said, "O, Tom, isn't it pretty?"

Lest you should think it showed a revolting insensibility in Tom that he felt any new anger towards Maggie for this uncalled-for and, to him, inexplicable caress, I must tell you that he had his glass of cowslip wine in his hand, and that she jerked him so as to make him spill half of it. He must have been an extreme milksop not to say angrily, "Look there now!" especially when his resentment was sanctioned, as it was, by general disapprobation of Maggie's behaviour.

“Why don’t you sit still, Maggie?” her mother said, peevishly.

“Little gells mustn’t come to see me if they behave in that way,” said aunt Pullet.

“Why, you’re too rough, little miss,” said uncle Pullet.

Poor Maggie sat down again, with the music all chased out of her soul, and the seven small demons all in again.

Mrs. Tulliver, foreseeing nothing but misbehaviour while the children remained in-doors, took an early opportunity of suggesting that, now they were rested after their walk, they might go and play out of doors; and aunt Pullet gave permission, only enjoining them not to go off the paved walks in the garden, and if they wanted to see the poultry fed, to view them from a distance on the horseblock; a restriction which had been imposed ever since Tom had been found guilty of running after the peacock, with an illusory idea that fright would make one of its feathers drop off.

Mrs. Tulliver’s thoughts had been temporarily diverted from the quarrel with Mrs. Glegg by millinery and maternal cares, but now the great theme of the bonnet was thrown into perspective, and the children were out of the way, yesterday’s anxieties recurred.

“It weighs on my mind so as never was,” she said, by way of opening the subject, “sister Glegg’s leaving the house in that way. I’m sure I’d no wish t’ offend a sister.”

“Ah,” said aunt Pullet, “there’s no accounting for what Jane ‘ull do. I wouldn’t speak of it out o’ the family—if it wasn’t to Dr. Turnbull; but it’s my belief Jane lives too low. I’ve said so to Pullet often and often, and he knows it.”

“Why, you said so last Monday was a week, when we came away from drinking tea with ’em,” said Mr. Pullet, beginning to nurse his knee and shelter it with his pocket-handkerchief, as was his way when the conversation took an interesting turn.

“Very like I did,” said Mrs. Pullet, “for you remember when I said things, better than I can remember myself. He’s got a wonderful memory, Pullet has,” she continued, looking pathetically at her

sister. “I should be poorly off if he was to have a stroke, for he always remembers when I’ve got to take my doctor’s stuff—and I’m taking three sorts now.”

“There’s the ‘pills as before’ every other night, and the new drops at eleven and four, and the ’fervescing mixture ‘when agreeable,’ ” rehearsed Mr. Pullet, with a punctuation determined by a lozenge on his tongue.

“Ah, perhaps it ’ud be better for sister Glegg, if *she’d* go to the doctor sometimes, instead o’ chewing Turkey rhubarb whenever there’s anything the matter with her,” said Mrs. Tulliver, who naturally saw the wide subject of medicine chiefly in relation to Mrs. Glegg.

“It’s dreadful to think on,” said aunt Pullet, raising her hands and letting them fall again, “people playing with their own insides in that way! And it’s flying i’ the face o’ Providence; for what are the doctors for, if we aren’t to call ’em in? And when folks have got the money to pay for a doctor, it isn’t respectable, as I’ve told Jane many a time. I’m ashamed of acquaintance knowing it.”

“Well, *we’ve* no call to be ashamed,” said Mr. Pullet, “for Doctor Turnbull hasn’t got such another patient as you i’ this parish, now old Mrs. Sutton’s gone.”

“Pullet keeps all my physic-bottles—did you know, Bessy?” said Mrs. Pullet. “He won’t have one sold. He says it’s nothing but right folks should see ’em when I’m gone. They fill two o’ the long storeroom shelves a’ready—but,” she added, beginning to cry a little, “it’s well if they ever fill three. I may go before I’ve made up the dozen o’ these last sizes. The pill-boxes are in the closet in my room—you’ll remember that, sister—but there’s nothing to show for the boluses, if it isn’t the bills.”

“Don’t talk o’ your going, sister,” said Mrs. Tulliver: “I should have nobody to stand between me and sister Glegg if you was gone. And there’s nobody but you can get her to make it up with Mr. Tulliver, for sister Deane’s never o’ my side, and if she was, it’s not

to be looked for as she can speak like them as have got an independent fortin."

"Well, your husband *is* awk'ard, you know, Bessy," said Mrs. Pullet, good-naturedly ready to use her deep depression on her sister's account as well as her own. "He's never behaved quite so pretty to our family as he should do, and the children take after him —the boy's very mischievous, and runs away from his aunts and uncles, and the gell's rude and brown. It's your bad-luck, and I'm sorry for you, Bessy; for you was allays my favourite sister, and we allays liked the same patterns."

"I know Tulliver's hasty, and says odd things," said Mrs. Tulliver, wiping away one small tear from the corner of her eye, "but I'm sure he's never been the man, since he married me, to object to my making the friends o' my side o' the family welcome to the house."

"*I* don't want to make the worst of you, Bessy," said Mrs. Pullet, compassionately, "for I doubt you'll have trouble enough without that; and your husband's got that poor sister and her children hanging on him,—and so given to lawing, they say. I doubt he'll leave you poorly off when he dies. Not as I'd have it said out o' the family."

This view of her position was naturally far from cheering to Mrs. Tulliver. Her imagination was not easily acted on, but she could not help thinking that her case was a hard one, since it appeared that other people thought it hard.

"I'm sure, sister, I can't help myself," she said, urged by the fear lest her anticipated misfortunes might be held retributive, to take a comprehensive review of her past conduct. "There's no woman strives more for her children; and I'm sure, at scouring-time this Ladyday as I've had all the bed-hangings taken down, I did as much as the two gells put together; and there's this last elder-flower wine I've made—beautiful! I allays offer it along with the sherry, though sister Glegg will have it I'm so extravagant; and as for liking to have my clothes tidy, and not go a fright about the house, there's nobody in the parish can say anything against me in respect o' backbiting

and making mischief, for I don't wish anybody any harm; and nobody loses by sending me a pork-pie, for my pies are fit to show with the best o' my neighbours'; and the linen's so in order, as if I was to die to-morrow I shouldn't be ashamed. A woman can do no more nor she can."

"But it's all o' no use, you know, Bessy," said Mrs. Pullet, holding her head on one side, and fixing her eyes pathetically on her sister, "if your husband makes away with his money. Not but what if you was sold up, and other folks bought your furniture, it's a comfort to think as you've kept it well rubbed. And there's the linen, with your maiden mark on, might go all over the country. It 'ud be a sad pity for our family." Mrs. Pullet shook her head slowly.

"But what can I do, sister?" said Mrs. Tulliver. "Mr. Tulliver's not a man to be dictated to—not if I was to go to the parson, and get by heart what I should tell my husband for the best. And I'm sure I don't pretend to know anything about putting out money and all that. I could never see into men's business as sister Glegg does."

"Well, you're like me in that, Bessy," said Mrs. Pullet; "and I think it 'ud be a deal more becoming o' Jane if she'd have that pier-glass rubbed oftener—there was ever so many spots on it last week—instead o' dictating to folks as have more comings in than she ever had, and telling 'em what they've to do with their money. But Jane and me were allays contrairy: she *would* have striped things, and I like spots. You like a spot too, Bessy: we allays hung together i' that."

"Yes, Sophy," said Mrs. Tulliver, "I remember our having a blue ground with a white spot both alike—I've got a bit in a bed-quilt now; and if you would but go and see sister Glegg, and persuade her to make it up with Tulliver, I should take it very kind of you. You was allays a good sister to me."

"But the right thing 'ud be for Tulliver to go and make it up with her himself, and say he was sorry for speaking so rash. If he's borrowed money of her, he shouldn't be above that," said Mrs.

Pullet, whose partiality did not blind her to principles: she did not forget what was due to people of independent fortune.

“It’s no use talking o’ that,” said poor Mrs. Tulliver, almost peevishly. “If I was to go down on my bare knees on the gravel to Tulliver, he’d never humble himself.”

“Well, you can’t expect me to persuade *Jane* to beg pardon,” said Mrs. Pullet. “Her temper’s beyond everything; it’s well if it doesn’t carry her off her mind, though there never *was* any of our family went to a madhouse.”

“I’m not thinking of her begging pardon,” said Mrs. Tulliver. “But if she’d just take no notice, and not call her money in; as it’s not so much for one sister to ask of another; time ’ud mend things, and Tulliver ’ud forget all about it, and they’d be friends again.”

Mrs. Tulliver, you perceive, was not aware of her husband’s irrevocable determination to pay in the five hundred pounds; at least such a determination exceeded her powers of belief.

“Well, Bessy,” said Mrs. Pullet, mournfully, “*I* don’t want to help you on to ruin. I won’t be behindhand i’ doing you a good turn, if it is to be done. And I don’t like it said among acquaintance as we’ve got quarrels in the family. I shall tell Jane that; and I don’t mind driving to Jane’s to-morrow, if Pullet doesn’t mind. What do you say, Mr. Pullet?”

“I’ve no objections,” said Mr. Pullet, who was perfectly contented with any course the quarrel might take, so that Mr. Tulliver did not apply to *him* for money. Mr. Pullet was nervous about his investments, and did not see how a man could have any security for his money unless he turned it into land.

After a little further discussion as to whether it would not be better for Mrs. Tulliver to accompany them on a visit to sister Glegg, Mrs. Pullet, observing that it was tea-time, turned to reach from a drawer a delicate damask napkin, which she pinned before her in the fashion of an apron. The door did, in fact, soon open, but instead of the tea-tray, Sally introduced an object so startling that both Mrs. Pullet and Mrs. Tulliver gave a scream, causing uncle

Pullet to swallow his lozenge—for the fifth time in his life, as he afterwards noted.

CHAPTER X

Maggie Behaves Worse Than She Expected

The startling object which thus made an epoch for uncle Pullet was no other than little Lucy, with one side of her person, from her small foot to her bonnet-crown, wet and discoloured with mud, holding out two tiny blackened hands, and making a very piteous face. To account for this unprecedented apparition in aunt Pullet's parlour, we must return to the moment when the three children went to play out of doors, and the small demons who had taken possession of Maggie's soul at an early period of the day had returned in all the greater force after a temporary absence. All the disagreeable recollections of the morning were thick upon her, when Tom, whose displeasure towards her had been considerably refreshed by her foolish trick of causing him to upset his cowslip wine, said, "Here, Lucy, you come along with me," and walked off to the area where the toads were, as if there were no Maggie in existence. Seeing this, Maggie lingered at a distance, looking like a small Medusa with her snakes cropped. Lucy was naturally pleased that cousin Tom was so good to her, and it was very amusing to see him tickling a fat toad with a piece of string when the toad was safe down the area, with an iron grating over him. Still Lucy wished Maggie to enjoy the spectacle also, especially as she would doubtless find a name for the toad, and say what had been his past history; for Lucy had a delighted semi-belief in Maggie's stories about the live things they came upon by accident—how Mrs. Earwig had a wash at home, and one of her children had fallen into the hot copper, for which reason she was running so fast to fetch the doctor. Tom had a profound contempt for this nonsense of Maggie's, smashing the earwig at once as a superfluous yet easy means of proving the entire unreality of such a story; but Lucy, for the life of her, could not help fancying there was something in it, and at all events thought it was very pretty make-believe. So now the desire to know the history of a very

portly toad, added to her habitual affectionateness, made her run back to Maggie and say, “O, there is such a big, funny toad, Maggie! Do come and see.”

Maggie said nothing, but turned away from her with a deeper frown. As long as Tom seemed to prefer Lucy to her, Lucy made part of his unkindness. Maggie would have thought a little while ago that she could never be cross with pretty little Lucy, any more than she could be cruel to a little white mouse; but then, Tom had always been quite indifferent to Lucy before, and it had been left to Maggie to pet and make much of her. As it was, she was actually beginning to think that she should like to make Lucy cry, by slapping or pinching her, especially as it might vex Tom, whom it was of no use to slap, even if she dared, because he didn’t mind it. And if Lucy hadn’t been there, Maggie was sure he would have got friends with her sooner.

Tickling a fat toad who is not highly sensitive, is an amusement that it is possible to exhaust, and Tom by-and-by began to look round for some other mode of passing the time. But in so prim a garden, where they were not to go off the paved walks, there was not a great choice of sport. The only great pleasure such a restriction suggested was the pleasure of breaking it, and Tom began to meditate an insurrectionary visit to the pond, about a field’s length beyond the garden.

“I say, Lucy,” he began, nodding his head up and down with great significance, as he coiled up his string again, “what do you think I mean to do?”

“What, Tom?” said Lucy, with curiosity.

“I mean to go to the pond, and look at the pike. You may go with me if you like,” said the young sultan.

“O Tom, *dare* you?” said Lucy. “Aunt said we mustn’t go out of the garden.”

“O, I shall go out at the other end of the garden,” said Tom. “Nobody ’ull see us. Besides, I don’t care if they do—I’ll run off home.”

“But *I* couldn’t run,” said Lucy, who had never before been exposed to such severe temptation.

“O, never mind—they won’t be cross with you,” said Tom. “You say I took you.”

Tom walked along, and Lucy trotted by his side, timidly enjoying the rare treat of doing something naughty—excited also by the mention of that celebrity, the pike, about which she was quite uncertain whether it was a fish or a fowl. Maggie saw them leaving the garden, and could not resist the impulse to follow. Anger and jealousy can no more bear to lose sight of their objects than love, and that Tom and Lucy should do or see anything of which she was ignorant would have been an intolerable idea to Maggie. So she kept a few yards behind them, unobserved by Tom, who was presently absorbed in watching for the pike—a highly interesting monster; he was said to be so very old, so very large, and to have such a remarkable appetite. The pike, like other celebrities, did not show when he was watched for, but Tom caught sight of something in rapid movement in the water, which attracted him to another spot on the brink of the pond.

“Here, Lucy!” he said in a loud whisper, “come here! take care! keep on the grass—don’t step where the cows have been!” he added, pointing to a peninsula of dry grass, with trodden mud on each side of it; for Tom’s contemptuous conception of a girl included the attribute of being unfit to walk in dirty places.

Lucy came carefully as she was bidden, and bent down to look at what seemed a golden arrow-head darting through the water. It was a water-snake, Tom told her, and Lucy at last could see the serpentine wave of its body, very much wondering that a snake could swim. Maggie had drawn nearer and nearer—she *must* see it too, though it was bitter to her like everything else, since Tom did not care about her seeing it. At last, she was close by Lucy, and Tom, who had been aware of her approach, but would not notice it till he was obliged, turned round and said—

“Now, get away, Maggie; there’s no room for you on the grass here. Nobody asked *you* to come.”

There were passions at war in Maggie at that moment to have made a tragedy, if tragedies were made by passion only; but the essential τι μέγεθοζ which was present in the passion was wanting to the action: the utmost Maggie could do, with a fierce thrust of her small brown arm, was to push poor little pink-and-white Lucy into the cow-trodden mud.

Then Tom could not restrain himself, and gave Maggie two smart slaps on the arm as he ran to pick up Lucy, who lay crying helplessly. Maggie retreated to the roots of a tree a few yards off, and looked on impenitently. Usually her repentance came quickly after one rash deed, but now Tom and Lucy had made her so miserable, she was glad to spoil their happiness—glad to make everybody uncomfortable. Why should she be sorry? Tom was very slow to forgive *her*, however sorry she might have been.

“I shall tell mother, you know, Miss Mag,” said Tom, loudly and emphatically, as soon as Lucy was up and ready to walk away. It was not Tom’s practice to “tell,” but here justice clearly demanded that Maggie should be visited with the utmost punishment: not that Tom had learnt to put his views in that abstract form; he never mentioned “justice,” and had no idea that his desire to punish might be called by that fine name. Lucy was too entirely absorbed by the evil that had befallen her—the spoiling of her pretty best clothes, and the discomfort of being wet and dirty—to think much of the cause, which was entirely mysterious to her. She could never have guessed what she had done to make Maggie angry with her; but she felt that Maggie was very unkind and disagreeable, and made no magnanimous entreaties to Tom that he would not “tell,” only running along by his side and crying piteously, while Maggie sat on the roots of the tree and looked after them with her small Medusa face.

“Sally,” said Tom, when they reached the kitchen door, and Sally looked at them in speechless amaze, with a piece of bread-and-

butter in her mouth and a toasting-fork in her hand—“Sally, tell mother it was Maggie pushed Lucy into the mud.”

“But Lors ha’ massy, how did you get near such mud as that?” said Sally, making a wry face, as she stooped down and examined the *corpus delicti*.

Tom’s imagination had not been rapid and capacious enough to include this question among the foreseen consequences, but it was no sooner put than he foresaw whither it tended, and that Maggie would not be considered the only culprit in the case. He walked quietly away from the kitchen door, leaving Sally to that pleasure of guessing which active minds notoriously prefer to ready-made knowledge.

Sally, as you are aware, lost no time in presenting Lucy at the parlour door, for to have so dirty an object introduced into the house at Garum Firs was too great a weight to be sustained by a single mind.

“Goodness gracious!” aunt Pullet exclaimed, after preluding by an inarticulate scream; “keep her at the door, Sally! Don’t bring her off the oil-cloth, whatever you do.”

“Why, she’s tumbled into some nasty mud,” said Mrs. Tulliver, going up to Lucy to examine into the amount of damage to clothes for which she felt herself responsible to her sister Deane.

“If you please, ‘um, it was Miss Maggie as pushed her in,” said Sally; “Master Tom’s been and said so, and they must ha’ been to the pond, for it’s only there they could ha’ got into such dirt.”

“There it is, Bessy; it’s what I’ve been telling you,” said Mrs. Pullet, in a tone of prophetic sadness: “it’s your children—there’s no knowing what they’ll come to.”

Mrs. Tulliver was mute, feeling herself a truly wretched mother. As usual, the thought pressed upon her that people would think she had done something wicked to deserve her maternal troubles, while Mrs. Pullet began to give elaborate directions to Sally how to guard the premises from serious injury in the course of removing the dirt. Meantime tea was to be brought in by the cook, and the two

naughty children were to have theirs in an ignominious manner in the kitchen. Mrs. Tulliver went out to speak to these naughty children, supposing them to be close at hand; but it was not until after some search that she found Tom leaning with rather a hardened careless air against the white paling of the poultry-yard, and lowering his piece of string on the other side as a means of exasperating the turkey-cock.

“Tom, you naughty boy, where’s your sister?” said Mrs. Tulliver, in a distressed voice.

“I don’t know,” said Tom; his eagerness for justice on Maggie had diminished since he had seen clearly that it could hardly be brought about without the injustice of some blame on his own conduct.

“Why, where did you leave her?” said his mother, looking round.

“Sitting under the tree against the pond,” said Tom, apparently indifferent to everything but the string and the turkey-cock.

“Then go and fetch her in this minute, you naughty boy. And how could you think o’ going to the pond, and taking your sister where there was dirt? You know she’ll do mischief, if there’s mischief to be done.”

It was Mrs. Tulliver’s way, if she blamed Tom, to refer his misdemeanour, somehow or other, to Maggie.

The idea of Maggie sitting alone by the pond, roused an habitual fear in Mrs. Tulliver’s mind, and she mounted the horse-block to satisfy herself by a sight of that fatal child, while Tom walked—not very quickly—on his way towards her.

“They’re such children for the water, mine are,” she said aloud, without reflecting that there was no one to hear her; “they’ll be brought in dead and drownded some day. I wish that river was far enough.”

But when she not only failed to discern Maggie, but presently saw Tom returning from the pool alone, this hovering fear entered and took complete possession of her, and she hurried to meet him.

“Maggie’s nowhere about the pond, mother,” said Tom; “she’s gone away.”

You may conceive the terrified search for Maggie, and the difficulty of convincing her mother that she was not in the pond. Mrs. Pullet observed that the child might come to a worse end if she lived—there was no knowing; and Mr. Pullet, confused and overwhelmed by this revolutionary aspect of things—the tea deferred and the poultry alarmed by the unusual running to and fro—took up his spud as an instrument of search, and reached down a key to unlock the goose-pen, as a likely place for Maggie to lie concealed in.

Tom, after a while, started the idea that Maggie was gone home (without thinking it necessary to state that it was what he should have done himself under the circumstances), and the suggestion was seized as a comfort by his mother.

“Sister, for goodness’ sake let ’em put the horse in the carriage and take me home—we shall perhaps find her on the road. Lucy can’t walk in her dirty clothes,” she said, looking at that innocent victim, who was wrapped up in a shawl, and sitting with naked feet on the sofa.

Aunt Pullet was quite willing to take the shortest means of restoring her premises to order and quiet, and it was not long before Mrs. Tulliver was in the chaise looking anxiously at the most distant point before her. What the father would say if Maggie was lost? was a question that predominated over every other.

CHAPTER XI

Maggie Tries to Run Away from Her Shadow

Maggie's intentions, as usual, were on a larger scale than Tom had imagined. The resolution that gathered in her mind, after Tom and Lucy had walked away, was not so simple as that of going home. No! she would run away and go to the gypsies, and Tom should never see her any more. That was by no means a new idea to Maggie; she had been so often told she was like a gypsy, and "half wild," that when she was miserable it seemed to her the only way of escaping opprobrium, and being entirely in harmony with circumstances would be to live in a little brown tent on the commons: the gypsies, she considered, would gladly receive her, and pay her much respect on account of her superior knowledge. She had once mentioned her views on this point to Tom, and suggested that he should stain his face brown, and they should run away together; but Tom rejected the scheme with contempt, observing that gypsies were thieves, and hardly got anything to eat, and had nothing to drive but a donkey. To-day, however, Maggie thought her misery had reached a pitch at which gypsydom was her only refuge, and she rose from her seat on the roots of the tree with the sense that this was a great crisis in her life; she would run straight away till she came to Dunlow Common, where there would certainly be gypsies; and cruel Tom, and the rest of her relations who found fault with her, should never see her any more. She thought of her father as she ran along, but she reconciled herself to the idea of parting with him, by determining that she would secretly send him a letter by a small gypsy, who would run away without telling where she was, and just let him know that she was well and happy, and always loved him very much.

Maggie soon got out of breath with running, but by the time Tom got to the pond again, she was at the distance of three long fields,

and was on the edge of the lane leading to the high-road. She stopped to pant a little, reflecting that running away was not a pleasant thing until one had got quite to the common where the gypsies were, but her resolution had not abated: she presently passed through the gate into the lane, not knowing where it would lead her, for it was not this way that they came from Dorlcote Mill to Garum Firs, and she felt all the safer for that, because there was no chance of her being overtaken. But she was soon aware, not without trembling, that there were two men coming along the lane in front of her: she had not thought of meeting strangers—she had been too much occupied with the idea of her friends coming after her. The formidable strangers were two shabby-looking men with flushed faces, one of them carrying a bundle on a stick over his shoulder: but to her surprise, while she was dreading their disapprobation as a runaway, the man with the bundle stopped, and in a half-whining half-coaxing tone asked her if she had a copper to give a poor man. Maggie had a sixpence in her pocket—her uncle Glegg's present—which she immediately drew out and gave this poor man with a polite smile, hoping he would feel very kindly towards her as a generous person. "That's the only money I've got," she said, apologetically. "Thank you, little miss," said the man in a less respectful and grateful tone than Maggie anticipated, and she even observed that he smiled and winked at his companion. She walked on hurriedly, but was aware that the two men were standing still, probably to look after her, and she presently heard them laughing loudly. Suddenly it occurred to her that they might think she was an idiot: Tom had said that her cropped hair made her look like an idiot, and it was too painful an idea to be readily forgotten. Besides, she had no sleeves on—only a cape and a bonnet. It was clear that she was not likely to make a favourable impression on passengers, and she thought she would turn into the fields again; but not on the same side of the lane as before, lest they should still be uncle Pullet's fields. She turned through the first gate that was not locked, and felt a delightful sense of privacy in creeping along by the hedgerows, after her recent humiliating encounter. She was used to wandering about the fields by herself, and was less timid

there than on the high-road. Sometimes she had to climb over high gates, but that was a small evil; she was getting out of reach very fast, and she should probably soon come within sight of Dunlow Common, or at least of some other common, for she had heard her father say that you couldn't go very far without coming to a common. She hoped so, for she was getting rather tired and hungry, and until she reached the gypsies there was no definite prospect of bread-and-butter. It was still broad daylight, for aunt Pullet, retaining the early habits of the Dodson family, took tea at half-past four by the sun, and at five by the kitchen clock; so, though it was nearly an hour since Maggie started, there was no gathering gloom on the fields to remind her that the night would come. Still, it seemed to her that she had been walking a very great distance indeed, and it was really surprising that the common did not come within sight. Hitherto she had been in the rich parish of Garum, where there was a great deal of pasture-land, and she had only seen one labourer at a distance. That was fortunate in some respects, as labourers might be too ignorant to understand the propriety of her wanting to go to Dunlow Common; yet it would have been better if she could have met some one who would tell her the way without wanting to know anything about her private business. At last, however, the green fields came to an end, and Maggie found herself looking through the bars of a gate into a lane with a wide margin of grass on each side of it. She had never seen such a wide lane before, and, without her knowing why, it gave her the impression that the common could not be far off; perhaps it was because she saw a donkey with a log to his foot feeding on the grassy margin, for she had seen a donkey with that pitiable encumbrance on Dunlow Common when she had been across it in her father's gig. She crept through the bars of the gate and walked on with new spirit, though not without haunting images of Apollyon, and a highwayman with a pistol, and a blinking dwarf in yellow, with a mouth from ear to ear, and other miscellaneous dangers. For poor little Maggie had at once the timidity of an active imagination and the daring that comes from overmastering impulse. She had rushed into the adventure of seeking her unknown kindred, the gypsies; and now she was in this

strange lane, she hardly dared look on one side of her, lest she should see the diabolical blacksmith in his leathern apron grinning at her with arms akimbo. It was not without a leaping of the heart that she caught sight of a small pair of bare legs sticking up, feet uppermost, by the side of a hillock; they seemed something hideously preternatural—a diabolical kind of fungus; for she was too much agitated at the first glance to see the ragged clothes and the dark shaggy head attached to them. It was a boy asleep, and Maggie trotted along faster and more lightly, lest she should wake him: it did not occur to her that he was one of her friends the gypsies, who in all probability would have very genial manners. But the fact was so, for at the next bend in the lane, Maggie actually saw the little semicircular black tent with the blue smoke rising before it, which was to be her refuge from all the blighting obloquy that had pursued her in civilised life. She even saw a tall female figure by the column of smoke—doubtless the gypsy-mother, who provided the tea and other groceries; it was astonishing to herself that she did not feel more delighted. But it was startling to find the gypsies in a lane, after all, and not on a common; indeed, it was rather disappointing; for a mysterious illimitable common, where there were sand-pits to hide in, and one was out of everybody's reach, had always made part of Maggie's picture of gypsy life. She went on, however, and thought with some comfort that gypsies most likely knew nothing about idiots, so there was no danger of their falling into the mistake of setting her down at the first glance as an idiot. It was plain she had attracted attention; for the tall figure, who proved to be a young woman with a baby on her arm, walked slowly to meet her. Maggie looked up in the new face rather tremblingly as it approached, and was reassured by the thought that her aunt Pullet and the rest were right when they called her a gypsy, for this face, with the bright dark eyes and the long hair, was really something like what she used to see in the glass before she cut her hair off.

"My little lady, where are you going to? "the gypsy said, in a tone of coaxing deference.

It was delightful, and just what Maggie expected: the gypsies saw at once that she was a little lady, and were prepared to treat her accordingly.

“Not any farther,” said Maggie, feeling as if she were saying what she had rehearsed in a dream. “I’m come to stay with *you*, please.”

“That’s pretty; come, then. Why, what a nice little lady you are, to be sure,” said the gypsy, taking her by the hand. Maggie thought her very agreeable, but wished she had not been so dirty.

There was quite a group round the fire when they reached it. An old gypsy woman was seated on the ground nursing her knees, and occasionally poking a skewer into the round kettle that sent forth an odorous steam: two small shock-headed children were lying prone and resting on their elbows something like small sphinxes; and a placid donkey was bending his head over a tall girl, who, lying on her back, was scratching his nose and indulging him with a bite of excellent stolen hay. The slanting sunlight fell kindly upon them, and the scene was really very pretty and comfortable, Maggie thought, only she hoped they would soon set out the tea-cups. Everything would be quite charming when she had taught the gypsies to use a washing-basin, and to feel an interest in books. It was a little confusing, though, that the young woman began to speak to the old one in a language which Maggie did not understand, while the tall girl, who was feeding the donkey, sat up and stared at her without offering any salutation. At last the old woman said—

“What, my pretty lady, are you come to stay with us? Sit ye down and tell us where ye come from.”

It was just like a story: Maggie liked to be called pretty lady and treated in this way. She sat down and said—

“I’m come from home because I’m unhappy, and I mean to be a gypsy. I’ll live with you if you like, and I can teach you a great many things.”

“Such a clever little lady,” said the woman with the baby, sitting down by Maggie, and allowing baby to crawl; “and such a pretty

bonnet and frock," she added, taking off Maggie's bonnet and looking at it while she made an observation to the old woman, in the unknown language. The tall girl snatched the bonnet and put it on her own head hind-foremost with a grin; but Maggie was determined not to show any weakness on this subject, as if she were susceptible about her bonnet.

"I don't want to wear a bonnet," she said, "I'd rather wear a red handkerchief, like yours" (looking at her friend by her side); "my hair was quite long till yesterday, when I cut it off: but I daresay it will grow again very soon," she added apologetically, thinking it probable the gypsies had a strong prejudice in favour of long hair. And Maggie had forgotten even her hunger at that moment in the desire to conciliate gypsy opinion.

"O what a nice little lady!—and rich, I'm sure," said the old woman. "Didn't you live in a beautiful house at home?"

"Yes, my home is pretty, and I'm very fond of the river, where we go fishing—but I'm often very unhappy. I should have liked to bring my books with me, but I came away in a hurry, you know. But I can tell you almost everything there is in my books, I've read them so many times—and that will amuse you. And I can tell you something about Geography too—that's about the world we live in—very useful and interesting. Did you ever hear about Columbus?"

Maggie's eyes had begun to sparkle and her cheeks to flush—she was really beginning to instruct the gypsies, and gaining great influence over them. The gypsies themselves were not without amazement at this talk, though their attention was divided by the contents of Maggie's pocket, which the friend at her right hand had by this time emptied without attracting her notice.

"Is that where you live, my little lady?" said the old woman, at the mention of Columbus.

"O no!" said Maggie, with some pity; "Columbus was a very wonderful man, who found out half the world, and they put chains on him and treated him very badly, you know—it's in my Catechism

of Geography—but perhaps it's rather too long to tell before tea … *I want my tea so*."

The last words burst from Maggie, in spite of herself, with a sudden drop from patronising instruction to simple peevishness.

"Why, she's hungry, poor little lady," said the younger woman. "Give her some o' the cold victual. You've been walking a good way, I'll be bound, my dear. Where's your home?"

"It's Dorlcote Mill, a good way off," said Maggie. "My father is Mr. Tulliver, but we mustn't let him know where I am, else he'll fetch me home again. Where does the queen of the gypsies live?"

"What! do you want to go to her, my little lady?" said the younger woman. The tall girl meanwhile was constantly staring at Maggie and grinning. Her manners were certainly not agreeable.

"No," said Maggie, "I'm only thinking that if she isn't a very good queen you might be glad when she died, and you could choose another. If I was a queen, I'd be a very good queen, and kind to everybody."

"Here's a bit o' nice victual, then," said the old woman, handing to Maggie a lump of dry bread, which she had taken from a bag of scraps, and a piece of cold bacon.

"Thank you," said Maggie, looking at the food without taking it; "but will you give me some bread-and-butter and tea instead? I don't like bacon."

"We've got no tea nor butter," said the old woman with something like a scowl, as if she were getting tired of coaxing.

"O, a little bread and treacle would do," said Maggie.

"We han't got no treacle," said the old woman crossly, whereupon there followed a sharp dialogue between the two women in their unknown tongue, and one of the small sphinxes snatched at the bread-and-bacon, and began to eat it. At this moment the tall girl, who had gone a few yards off, came back, and said something which produced a strong effect. The old woman, seeming to forget Maggie's hunger, poked the skewer into the pot with new vigour,

and the younger crept under the tent, and reached out some platters and spoons. Maggie trembled a little, and was afraid the tears would come into her eyes. Meanwhile the tall girl gave a shrill cry, and presently came running up the boy whom Maggie had passed as he was sleeping—a rough urchin about the age of Tom. He stared at Maggie, and there ensued much incomprehensible chattering. She felt very lonely, and was quite sure she should begin to cry before long: the gypsies didn't seem to mind her at all, and she felt quite weak among them. But the springing tears were checked by new terror, when two men came up, whose approach had been the cause of the sudden excitement. The elder of the two carried a bag, which he flung down, addressing the women in a loud and scolding tone, which they answered by a shower of treble sauciness; while a black cur ran barking up to Maggie, and threw her into a tremor that only found a new cause in the curses with which the younger man called the dog off, and gave him a rap with a great stick he held in his hand.

Maggie felt that it was impossible she should ever be queen of these people, or even communicate to them amusing and useful knowledge.

Both the men now seemed to be inquiring about Maggie, for they looked at her, and the tone of the conversation became of that pacific kind which implies curiosity on one side and the power of satisfying it on the other. At last the younger woman said in her previous deferential coaxing tone—

"This nice little lady's come to live with us: aren't you glad?"

"Ay, very glad," said the younger man, who was looking at Maggie's silver thimble and other small matters that had been taken from her pocket. He returned them all except the thimble to the younger woman, with some observation, and she immediately restored them to Maggie's pocket, while the men seated themselves, and began to attack the contents of the kettle—a stew of meat and potatoes—which had been taken off the fire and turned out into a yellow platter.

Maggie began to think that Tom must be right about the gypsies—they must certainly be thieves, unless the man meant to return her thimble by-and-by. She would willingly have given it to him, for she was not at all attached to her thimble; but the idea that she was among thieves prevented her from feeling any comfort in the revival of deference and attention towards her—all thieves, except Robin Hood, were wicked people. The women saw she was frightened.

"We've got nothing nice for a lady to eat," said the old woman, in her coaxing tone. "And she's so hungry, sweet little lady."

"Here, my dear, try if you can eat a bit o' this," said the younger woman, handing some of the stew on a brown dish with an iron spoon to Maggie, who, remembering that the old woman had seemed angry with her for not liking the bread-and-bacon, dared not refuse the stew, though fear had chased away her appetite. If her father would but come by in the gig and take her up! Or even if Jack the Giantkiller, or Mr. Greatheart, or St. George who slew the dragon on the halfpennies, would happen to pass that way! But Maggie thought with a sinking heart that these heroes were never seen in the neighbourhood of St. Ogg's—nothing very wonderful ever came there.

Maggie Tulliver, you perceive, was by no means that well-trained, well-informed young person that a small female of eight or nine necessarily is in these days: she had only been to school a year at St. Ogg's, and had so few books that she sometimes read the dictionary; so that in travelling over her small mind you would have found the most unexpected ignorance as well as unexpected knowledge. She could have informed you that there was such a word as "polygamy," and being also acquainted with "polysyllable," she had deduced the conclusion that "poly" meant "many;" but she had had no idea that gypsies were not well supplied with groceries, and her thoughts generally were the oddest mixture of clear-eyed acumen and blind dreams.

Her ideas about the gypsies had undergone a rapid modification in the last five minutes. From having considered them very respectful companions, amenable to instruction, she had begun to

think that they meant perhaps to kill her as soon as it was dark, and cut up her body for gradual cooking: the suspicion crossed her that the fierce-eyed old man was in fact the devil, who might drop that transparent disguise at any moment, and turn either into the grinning blacksmith or else a fiery-eyed monster with dragon's wings. It was no use trying to eat the stew, and yet the thing she most dreaded was to offend the gypsies, by betraying her extremely unfavourable opinion of them, and she wondered, with a keenness of interest that no theologian could have exceeded, whether, if the devil were really present, he would know her thoughts.

"What! you don't like the smell of it, my dear," said the young woman, observing that Maggie did not even take a spoonful of the stew. "Try a bit—come."

"No, thank you," said Maggie, summoning all her force for a desperate effort, and trying to smile in a friendly way. "I haven't time, I think—it seems getting darker. I think I must go home now, and come again another day, and then I can bring you a basket with some jam-tarts and things."

Maggie rose from her seat as she threw out this illusory prospect, devoutly hoping that Apollyon was gullible; but her hope sank when the old gypsy-woman said, "Stop a bit, stop a bit, little lady—we'll take you home, all safe, when we've done supper: you shall ride home, like a lady."

Maggie sat down again, with little faith in this promise, though she presently saw the tall girl putting a bridle on the donkey, and throwing a couple of bags on his back.

"Now, then, little missis," said the younger man, rising, and leading the donkey forward, "tell us where you live—what's the name o' the place?"

"Dorlcote Mill is my home," said Maggie, eagerly. "My father is Mr. Tulliver—he lives there."

"What! a big mill a little way this side o' St. Ogg's?"

"Yes," said Maggie. "Is it far off? I think I should like to walk there, if you please."

“No, no, it’ll be getting dark, we must make haste. And the donkey’ll carry you as nice as can be—you’ll see.”

He lifted Maggie as he spoke, and set her on the donkey. She felt relieved that it was not the old man who seemed to be going with her, but she had only a trembling hope that she was really going home.

“Here’s your pretty bonnet,” said the younger woman, putting that recently-despised but now welcome article of costume on Maggie’s head; “and you’ll say we’ve been very good to you, won’t you? and what a nice little lady we said you was.”

“O, yes, thank you,” said Maggie, “I’m very much obliged to you. But I wish you’d go with me too.” She thought anything was better than going with one of the dreadful men alone: it would be more cheerful to be murdered by a larger party.

“Ah, you’re fondest o’ *me*, aren’t you?” said the woman. “But I can’t go—you’ll go too fast for me.”

It now appeared that the man also was to be seated on the donkey, holding Maggie before him, and she was as incapable of remonstrating against this arrangement as the donkey himself, though no nightmare had ever seemed to her more horrible. When the woman had patted her on the back, and said “Good-bye,” the donkey, at a strong hint from the man’s stick, set off at a rapid walk along the lane towards the point Maggie had come from an hour ago, while the tall girl and the rough urchin, also furnished with sticks, obligingly escorted them for the first hundred yards, with much screaming and thwacking.

Not Leonore, in that preternatural midnight excursion with her phantom lover, was more terrified than poor Maggie in this entirely natural ride on a short-paced donkey, with a gypsy behind her, who considered that he was earning half-a-crown. The red light of the setting sun seemed to have a portentous meaning, with which the alarming bray of the second donkey with the log on its foot must surely have some connection. Two low thatched cottages—the only houses they passed in this lane—seemed to add to its dreariness:

they had no windows to speak of, and the doors were closed: it was probable that they were inhabited by witches, and it was a relief to find that the donkey did not stop there.

At last—O, sight of joy!—this lane, the longest in the world, was coming to an end, was opening on a broad high-road, where there was actually a coach passing! And there was a finger-post at the corner: she had surely seen that finger-post before—"To St. Ogg's, 2 miles." The gypsy really meant to take her home, then: he was probably a good man, after all, and might have been rather hurt at the thought that she didn't like coming with him alone. This idea became stronger as she felt more and more certain that she knew the road quite well, and she was considering how she might open a conversation with the injured gypsy, and not only gratify his feelings but efface the impression of her cowardice, when, as they reached a cross-road, Maggie caught sight of some one coming on a white-faced horse.

"O, stop, stop!" she cried out. "There's my father! O, father, father!"

The sudden joy was almost painful, and before her father reached her, she was sobbing. Great was Mr. Tulliver's wonder, for he had made a round from Basset, and had not yet been home.

"Why, what's the meaning o' this?" he said, checking his horse, while Maggie slipped from the donkey and ran to her father's stirrup.

"The little miss lost herself, I reckon," said the gypsy. "She'd come to our tent at the far end o' Dudlow Lane, and I was bringing her where she said her home was. It's a good way to come arter being on the tramp all day."

"O, yes, father, he's been very good to bring me home," said Maggie. "A very kind, good man!"

"Here, then, my man," said Mr. Tulliver, taking out five shillings. "It's the best day's work *you* ever did. I couldn't afford to lose the little wench; here, lift her up before me."

“Why, Maggie, how’s this, how’s this?” he said, as they rode along, while she laid her head against her father, and sobbed. “How came you to be rambling about and lose yourself?”

“O, father,” sobbed Maggie, “I ran away because I was so unhappy—Tom was so angry with me. I couldn’t bear it.”

“Pooh, pooh,” said Mr. Tulliver, soothingly, “you mustn’t think o’ running away from father. What ’ud father do without his little wench?”

“O no, I never will again, father—never.”

Mr. Tulliver spoke his mind very strongly when he reached home that evening, and the effect was seen in the remarkable fact, that Maggie never heard one reproach from her mother, or one taunt from Tom, about this foolish business of her running away to the gypsies. Maggie was rather awe-stricken by this unusual treatment, and sometimes thought that her conduct had been too wicked to be alluded to.

CHAPTER XII

Mr. and Mrs. Glegg at Home

In order to see Mr. and Mrs. Glegg at home, we must enter the town of St. Ogg's—that venerable town with the red-fluted roofs and the broad warehouse gables, where the black ships unlade themselves of their burthens from the far north, and carry away, in exchange, the precious inland products, the well-crushed cheese and the soft fleeces, which my refined readers have doubtless become acquainted with through the medium of the best classic pastorals.

It is one of those old, old towns which impress one as a continuation and outgrowth of nature, as much as the nests of the bower-birds or the winding galleries of the white ants: a town which carries the traces of its long growth and history like a millennial tree, and has sprung up and developed in the same spot between the river and the low hill from the time when the Roman legions turned their backs on it from the camp on the hill-side, and the long-haired sea-kings came up the river and looked with fierce eager eyes at the fatness of the land. It is a town "familiar with forgotten years." The shadow of the Saxon hero-king still walks there fitfully, reviewing the scenes of his youth and lovetime, and is met by the gloomier shadow of the dreadful heathen Dane, who was stabbed in the midst of his warriors by the sword of an invisible avenger, and who rises on autumn evenings like a white mist from his tumulus on the hill, and hovers in the court of the old hall by the river-side—the spot where he was thus miraculously slain in the days before the old hall was built. It was the Normans who began to build that fine old hall, which is like the town, telling of the thoughts and hands of widely-sundered generations; but it is all so old that we look with loving pardon at its inconsistencies, and are well content that they who built the stone oriel, and they who built the Gothic façade and towers of finest small brickwork with the trefoil ornament, and the

windows and battlements defined with stone, did not sacrilegiously pull down the ancient half-timbered body with its oak-roofed banqueting-hall.

But older even than this old hall is perhaps the bit of wall now built into the belfry of the parish church, and said to be a remnant of the original chapel dedicated to St. Ogg, the patron saint of this ancient town, of whose history I possess several manuscript versions. I incline to the briefest, since, if it should not be wholly true, it is at least likely to contain the least falsehood. “Ogg the son of Beorl,” says my private hagiographer, “was a boatman who gained a scanty living by ferrying passengers across the river Floss. And it came to pass, one evening when the winds were high, that there sat moaning by the brink of the river a woman with a child in her arms; and she was clad in rags, and had a worn and withered look, and she craved to be rowed across the river. And the men thereabout questioned her, and said, ‘Wherefore dost thou desire to cross the river? Tarry till the morning, and take shelter here for the night: so shalt thou be wise, and not foolish.’ Still she went on to mourn and crave. But Ogg the son of Beorl came up and said, ‘I will ferry thee across: it is enough that thy heart needs it.’ And he ferried her across. And it came to pass, when she stepped ashore, that her rags were turned into robes of flowing white, and her face became bright with exceeding beauty, and there was a glory around it, so that she shed a light on the water like the moon in its brightness. And she said—Ogg the son of Beorl, thou art blessed in that thou didst not question and wrangle with the heart’s need, but wast smitten with pity, and didst straightway relieve the same. And from henceforth who-so steps into thy boat shall be in no peril from the storm; and whenever it puts forth to the rescue, it shall save the lives both of men and beasts.’ And when the floods came, many were saved by reason of that blessing on the boat. But when Ogg the son of Beorl died, behold, in the parting of his soul, the boat loosed itself from its moorings, and was floated with the ebbing tide in great swiftness to the ocean, and was seen no more. Yet it was witnessed in the floods of aftertime, that at the coming on of

eventide, Ogg the son of Beorl was always seen with his boat upon the wide-spreading waters, and the Blessed Virgin sat in the prow, shedding a light around as of the moon in its brightness, so that the rowers in the gathering darkness took heart and pulled anew."

This legend, one sees, reflects from a far-off time the visitation of the floods, which, even when they left human life untouched, were widely fatal to the helpless cattle, and swept as sudden death over all smaller living things. But the town knew worse troubles even than the floods—troubles of the civil wars, when it was a continual fighting-place, where first Puritans thanked God for the blood of the Loyalists, and then Loyalists thanked God for the blood of the Puritans. Many honest citizens lost all their possessions for conscience' sake in those times, and went forth beggared from their native town. Doubtless there are many houses standing now on which those honest citizens turned their backs in sorrow: quaint-gabled houses looking on the river, jammed between newer warehouses, and penetrated by surprising passages, which turn and turn at sharp angles till they lead you out on a muddy strand overflowed continually by the rushing tide. Everywhere the brick houses have a mellow look, and in Mrs. Glegg's day there was no incongruous new-fashioned smartness, no plate-glass in shop windows, no fresh stucco-facing or other fallacious attempt to make fine old red St. Ogg's wear the air of a town that sprang up yesterday. The shop windows were small and unpretending; for the farmers' wives and daughters who came to do their shopping on market-days were not to be withdrawn from their regular, well-known shops; and the tradesmen had no wares intended for customers who would go on their way and be seen no more. Ah! even Mrs. Glegg's day seems far back in the past now, separated from us by changes that widen the years. War and the rumour of war had then died out from the minds of men, and if they were ever thought of by the farmers in drab great-coats, who shook the grain out of their sample-bags and buzzed over it in the full market-place, it was as a state of things that belonged to a past golden age, when prices were high. Surely the time was gone for ever when the broad

river could bring up unwelcome ships: Russia was only the place where the linseed came from—the more the better—making grist for the great vertical millstones with their scythe-like arms, roaring and grinding and carefully sweeping as if an informing soul were in them. The Catholics, bad harvests, and the mysterious fluctuations of trade, were the three evils mankind had to fear: even the floods had not been great of late years. The mind of St. Ogg's did not look extensively before or after. It inherited a long past without thinking of it, and had no eyes for the spirits that walk the streets. Since the centuries when St. Ogg with his boat and the Virgin Mother at the prow had been seen on the wide water, so many memories had been left behind, and had gradually vanished like the receding hill-tops! And the present time was like the level plain where men lose their belief in volcanoes and earthquakes, thinking to-morrow will be as yesterday, and the giant forces that used to shake the earth are for ever laid to sleep. The days were gone when people could be greatly wrought upon by their faith, still less change it: the Catholics were formidable because they would lay hold of government and property, and burn men alive; not because any sane and honest parishioner of St. Ogg's could be brought to believe in the Pope. One aged person remembered how a rude multitude had been swayed when John Wesley preached in the cattle-market; but for a long while it had not been expected of preachers that they should shake the souls of men. An occasional burst of fervour, in Dissenting pulpits, on the subject of infant baptism, was the only symptom of a zeal unsuited to sober times when men had done with change. Protestantism sat at ease, unmindful of schisms, careless of proselytism: Dissent was an inheritance along with a superior pew and a business connection; and Churchmanship only wondered contemptuously at Dissent as a foolish habit that clung greatly to families in the grocery and chandlering lines, though not incompatible with prosperous wholesale dealing. But with the Catholic Question had come a slight wind of controversy to break the calm: the elderly rector had become occasionally historical and argumentative, and Mr. Spray, the Independent minister, had begun to preach political sermons, in which he distinguished with much

subtlety between his fervent belief in the right of the Catholics to the franchise and his fervent belief in their eternal perdition. Most of Mr. Spray's hearers, however, were incapable of following his subtleties, and many old-fashioned Dissenters were much pained by his "siding with the Catholics;" while others thought he had better let politics alone. Public spirit was not held in high esteem at St. Ogg's, and men who busied themselves with political questions were regarded with some suspicion, as dangerous characters: they were usually persons who had little or no business of their own to manage, or, if they had, were likely enough to become insolvent.

This was the general aspect of things at St. Ogg's in Mrs. Glegg's day, and at that particular period in her family history when she had had her quarrel with Mr. Tulliver. It was a time when ignorance was much more comfortable than at present, and was received with all the honours in very good society, without being obliged to dress itself in an elaborate costume of knowledge; a time when cheap periodicals were not, and when country surgeons never thought of asking their female patients if they were fond of reading, but simply took it for granted that they preferred gossip; a time when ladies in rich silk gowns wore large pockets, in which they carried a mutton-bone to secure them against cramp. Mrs. Glegg carried such a bone, which she had inherited from her grandmother with a brocaded gown that would stand up empty, like a suit of armour, and a silver-headed walking-stick; for the Dodson family had been respectable for many generations.

Mrs. Glegg had both a front and a back parlour in her excellent house at St. Ogg's, so that she had two points of view from which she could observe the weakness of her fellow-beings, and reinforce her thankfulness for her own exceptional strength of mind. From her front windows she could look down the Tofton Road, leading out of St. Ogg's, and note the growing tendency to "gadding about" in the wives of men not retired from business, together with a practice of wearing woven cotton stockings, which opened a dreary prospect for the coming generation; and from her back windows she could look down the pleasant garden and orchard which stretched to the

river, and observe the folly of Mr. Glegg in spending his time among "them flowers and vegetables." For Mr. Glegg, having retired from active business as a wool-stapler, for the purpose of enjoying himself through the rest of his life, had found this last occupation so much more severe than his business, that he had been driven into amateur hard labour as a dissipation, and habitually relaxed by doing the work of two ordinary gardeners. The economising of a gardener's wages might perhaps have induced Mrs. Glegg to wink at this folly, if it were possible for a healthy female mind even to simulate respect for a husband's hobby. But it is well known that this conjugal complacency belongs only to the weaker portion of the sex, who are scarcely alive to the responsibilities of a wife as a constituted check on her husband's pleasures, which are hardly ever of a rational or commendable kind.

Mr. Glegg on his side, too, had a double source of mental occupation, which gave every promise of being inexhaustible. On the one hand, he surprised himself by his discoveries in natural history, finding that his piece of garden-ground contained wonderful caterpillars, slugs, and insects, which, so far as he had heard, had never before attracted human observation; and he noticed remarkable coincidences between these zoological phenomena and the great events of that time,—as, for example, that before the burning of York Minster there had been mysterious serpentine marks on the leaves of the rose-trees, together with an unusual prevalence of slugs, which he had been puzzled to know the meaning of, until it flashed upon him with this melancholy conflagration. (Mr. Glegg had an unusual amount of mental activity, which, when disengaged from the wool business, naturally made itself a pathway in other directions.) And his second subject of meditation was the "contrairiness" of the female mind, as typically exhibited in Mrs. Glegg. That a creature made—in a genealogical sense—out of a man's rib, and in this particular case maintained in the highest respectability without any trouble of her own, should be normally in a state of contradiction to the blandest propositions and even to the most accommodating concessions, was a mystery in the

scheme of things to which he had often in vain sought a clue in the early chapters of Genesis. Mr. Glegg had chosen the eldest Miss Dodson as a handsome embodiment of female prudence and thrift, and being himself of a money-getting, money-keeping turn, had calculated on much conjugal harmony. But in that curious compound, the feminine character, it may easily happen that the flavour is unpleasant in spite of excellent ingredients; and a fine systematic stinginess may be accompanied with a seasoning that quite spoils its relish. Now, good Mr. Glegg himself was stingy in the most amiable manner: his neighbours called him “near,” which always means that the person in question is a lovable skinflint. If you expressed a preference for cheese-parings, Mr. Glegg would remember to save them for you, with a good-natured delight in gratifying your palate, and he was given to pet all animals which required no appreciable keep. There was no humbug or hypocrisy about Mr. Glegg: his eyes would have watered with true feeling over the sale of a widow’s furniture, which a five-pound note from his side-pocket would have prevented; but a donation of five pounds to a person “in a small way of life” would have seemed to him a mad kind of lavishness rather than “charity,” which had always presented itself to him as a contribution of small aids, not a neutralising of misfortune. And Mr. Glegg was just as fond of saving other people’s money as his own: he would have ridden as far round to avoid a turnpike when his expenses were to be paid for him, as when they were to come out of his own pocket, and was quite zealous in trying to induce indifferent acquaintances to adopt a cheap substitute for blacking. This inalienable habit of saving, as an end in itself, belonged to the industrious men of business of a former generation, who made their fortunes slowly, almost as the tracking of the fox belongs to the harrier—it constituted them a “race,” which is nearly lost in these days of rapid money-getting, when lavishness comes close on the back of want. In old-fashioned times, an “independence” was hardly ever made without a little miserliness as a condition, and you would have found that quality in every provincial district, combined with characters as various as the fruits from which we can extract acid. The true Harpagons were always

marked and exceptional characters: not so the worthy tax-payers, who, having once pinched from real necessity, retained even in the midst of their comfortable retirement, with their wall-fruit and wine-bins, the habit of regarding life as an ingenious process of nibbling out one's livelihood without leaving any perceptible deficit, and who would have been as immediately prompted to give up a newly-taxed luxury when they had their clear five hundred a-year, as when they had only five hundred pounds of capital. Mr. Glegg was one of these men, found so impracticable by chancellors of the exchequer; and knowing this, you will be better able to understand why he had not swerved from the conviction that he had made an eligible marriage, in spite of the too pungent seasoning that nature had given to the eldest Miss Dodson's virtues. A man with an affectionate disposition, who finds a wife to concur with his fundamental idea of life, easily comes to persuade himself that no other woman would have suited him so well, and does a little daily snapping and quarrelling without any sense of alienation. Mr. Glegg, being of a reflective turn, and no longer occupied with wool, had much wondering meditation on the peculiar constitution of the female mind as unfolded to him in his domestic life; and yet he thought Mrs. Glegg's household ways a model for her sex: it struck him as a pitiable irregularity in other women if they did not roll up their table-napkins with the same tightness and emphasis as Mrs. Glegg did, if their pastry had a less leathery consistence, and their damson cheese a less venerable hardness than hers: nay, even the peculiar combination of grocery and drug-like odours in Mrs. Glegg's private cupboard impressed him as the only right thing in the way of cupboard smells. I am not sure that he would not have longed for the quarrelling again, if it had ceased for an entire week; and it is certain that an acquiescent mild wife would have left his meditations comparatively jejune and barren of mystery.

Mr. Glegg's unmistakeable kind-heartedness was shown in this, that it pained him more to see his wife at variance with others—even with Dolly, the servant—than to be in a state of cavil with her himself; and the quarrel between her and Mr. Tulliver vexed him so

much that it quite nullified the pleasure he would otherwise have had in the state of his early cabbages, as he walked in his garden before breakfast the next morning. Still he went into breakfast with some slight hope that, now Mrs. Glegg had “slept upon it,” her anger might be subdued enough to give way to her usually strong sense of family decorum. She had been used to boast that there had never been any of those deadly quarrels among the Dodsons which had disgraced other families; that no Dodson had ever been “cut off with a shilling,” and no cousin of the Dodsons disowned; as, indeed, why should they be? for they had no cousins who had not money out at use, or some houses of their own, at the very least.

There was one evening-cloud which had always disappeared from Mrs. Glegg’s brow when she sat at the breakfast-table: it was her fuzzy front of curls; for as she occupied herself in household matters in the morning, it would have been a mere extravagance to put on anything so superfluous to the making of leathery pastry as a fuzzy curled front. By half-past ten decorum demanded the front: until then Mrs. Glegg could economise it, and society would never be any the wiser. But the absence of that cloud only left it more apparent that the cloud of severity remained; and Mr. Glegg, perceiving this, as he sat down to his milk-porridge, which it was his old frugal habit to stem his morning hunger with, prudently resolved to leave the first remark to Mrs. Glegg, lest, to so delicate an article as a lady’s temper, the slightest touch should do mischief. People who seem to enjoy their ill-temper have a way of keeping it in fine condition by inflicting privations on themselves. That was Mrs. Glegg’s way: she made her tea weaker than usual this morning, and declined butter. It was a hard case that a vigorous mood for quarrelling, so highly capable of using any opportunity, should not meet with a single remark from Mr. Glegg on which to exercise itself. But by-and-by it appeared that his silence would answer the purpose, for he heard himself apostrophised at last in that tone peculiar to the wife of one’s bosom.

“Well, Mr. Glegg! it’s a poor return I get for making you the wife I’ve made you all these years. If this is the way I’m to be treated, I’d

better ha' known it before my poor father died, and then, when I'd wanted a home, I should ha' gone elsewhere—as the choice was offered me."

Mr. Glegg paused from his porridge and looked up—not with any new amazement, but simply with that quiet, habitual wonder with which we regard constant mysteries.

"Why, Mrs. G., what have I done now?"

"Done now, Mr. Glegg? *done now?* … I'm sorry for you."

Not seeing his way to any pertinent answer, Mr. Glegg reverted to his porridge.

"There's husbands in the world," continued Mrs. Glegg, after a pause, "as 'ud have known how to do something different to siding with everybody else against their own wives. Perhaps I'm wrong, and you can teach me better. But I've allays heard as it's the husband's place to stand by the wife, instead o' rejoicing and triumphing when folks insult her."

"Now, what call have you to say that?" said Mr. Glegg, rather warmly, for though a kind man, he was not as meek as Moses. "When did I rejoice or triumph over you?"

"There's ways o' doing things worse than speaking out plain, Mr. Glegg. I'd sooner you'd tell me to my face as you make light of me, than try to make out as everybody's in the right but me, and come to your breakfast in the morning, as I've hardly slept an hour this night, and sulk at me as if I was the dirt under your feet."

"Sulk at you?" said Mr. Glegg, in a tone of angry facetiousness. "You're like a tipsy man as thinks everybody's had too much but himself."

"Don't lower yourself with using coarse language to *me*, Mr. Glegg! It makes you look very small, though you can't see yourself," said Mrs. Glegg, in a tone of energetic compassion. "A man in your place should set an example, and talk more sensible."

"Yes; but will you listen to sense?" retorted Mr. Glegg, sharply. "The best sense I can talk to you is what I said last night—as you're

i' the wrong to think o' calling in your money, when it's safe enough if you'd let it alone, all because of a bit of a tiff, and I was in hopes you'd ha' altered your mind this morning. But if you'd like to call it in, don't do it in a hurry now, and breed more enmity in the family —but wait till there's a pretty mortgage to be had without any trouble. You'd have to set the lawyer to work now to find an investment, and make no end o' expense."

Mrs. Glegg felt there was really something in this, but she tossed her head and emitted a guttural interjection to indicate that her silence was only an armistice, not a peace. And, in fact, hostilities soon broke out again.

"I'll thank you for my cup o' tea, now, Mrs. G.," said Mr. Glegg, seeing that she did not proceed to give it him as usual, when he had finished his porridge. She lifted the teapot with a slight toss of the head, and said,

"I'm glad to hear you'll *thank* me, Mr. Glegg. It's little thanks *I* get for what I do for folks i' this world. Though there's never a woman o' *your* side o' the family, Mr. Glegg, as is fit to stand up with me, and I'd say it if I was on my dying bed. Not but what I've allays conducted myself civil to your kin, and there isn't one of 'em can say the contrary, though my equils they aren't, and nobody shall make me say it."

"You'd better leave finding fault wi' my kin till you've left off quarrelling with your own, Mrs. G.," said Mr. Glegg, with angry sarcasm. "I'll trouble you for the milk-jug."

"That's as false a word as ever you spoke, Mr. Glegg," said the lady, pouring out the milk with unusual profuseness, as much as to say, if he wanted milk he should have it with a vengeance. "And you know it's false. I'm not the woman to quarrel with my own kin: *you* may, for I've known you do it."

"Why, what did you call it yesterday, then, leaving your sister's house in a tantrum?"

"I'd no quarrel wi' my sister, Mr. Glegg, and it's false to say it. Mr. Tulliver's none o' my blood, and it was him quarrelled with me, and

drove me out o' the house. But perhaps you'd have had me stay and be swore at, Mr. Glegg; perhaps you was vexed not to hear more abuse and foul language poured out upo' your own wife. But, let me tell you, it's *your* disgrace."

"Did ever anybody hear the like i' this parish?" said Mr. Glegg, getting hot. "A woman, with everything provided for her, and allowed to keep her own money the same as if it was settled on her, and with a gig new stuffed and lined at no end o' expense, and provided for when I die beyond anything she could expect.... To go on i' this way, biting and snapping like a mad dog! It's beyond everything, as God A'mighty should ha' made women *so."* (These last words were uttered in a tone of sorrowful agitation. Mr. Glegg pushed his tea from him, and tapped the table with both his hands.)

"Well, Mr. Glegg! if those are your feelings, it's best they should be known," said Mrs. Glegg, taking off her napkin, and folding it in an excited manner. "But if you talk o' my being provided for beyond what I could expect, I beg leave to tell you as I'd a right to expect a many things as I don't find. And as to my being like a mad dog, it's well if you're not cried shame on by the county for your treatment of me, for it's what I can't bear, and I won't bear...."

Here Mrs. Glegg's voice intimated that she was going to cry, and, breaking off from speech, she rang the bell violently.

"Sally," she said, rising from her chair, and speaking in rather a choked voice, "light a fire up-stairs, and put the blinds down. Mr. Glegg, you'll please to order what you'd like for dinner. I shall have gruel."

Mrs. Glegg walked across the room to the small book-case, and took down Baxter's "Saints' Everlasting Rest," which she carried with her up-stairs. It was the book she was accustomed to lay open before her on special occasions: on wet Sunday mornings, or when she heard of a death in the family, or when, as in this case, her quarrel with Mr. Glegg had been set an octave higher than usual.

But Mrs. Glegg carried something else up-stairs with her, which, together with the "Saints' Rest" and the gruel, may have had some

influence in gradually calming her feelings, and making it possible for her to endure existence on the ground-floor shortly before tea-time. This was, partly, Mr. Glegg's suggestion, that she would do well to let her five hundred lie still until a good investment turned up; and, further, his parenthetic hint at his handsome provision for her in case of his death. Mr. Glegg, like all men of his stamp, was extremely reticent about his will; and Mrs. Glegg, in her gloomier moments, had forebodings that, like other husbands of whom she had heard, he might cherish the mean project of heightening her grief at his death by leaving her poorly off, in which case she was firmly resolved that she would have scarcely any weeper on her bonnet, and would cry no more than if he had been a second husband. But if he had really shown her any testamentary tenderness, it would be affecting to think of him, poor man, when he was gone; and even his foolish fuss about the flowers and garden-stuff, and his insistance on the subject of snails, would be touching when it was once fairly at an end. To survive Mr. Glegg, and talk eulogistically of him as a man who might have his weaknesses, but who had done the right thing by her, notwithstanding his numerous poor relations—to have sums of interest coming in more frequently, and secrete it in various corners, baffling to the most ingenious of thieves (for, to Mrs. Glegg's mind, banks and strong-boxes would have nullified the pleasure of property—she might as well have taken her food in capsules)—finally, to be looked up to by her own family and the neighbourhood, so as no woman can ever hope to be who has not the prœterite and present dignity comprised in being a "widow well left,"—all this made a flattering and conciliatory view of the future. So that when good Mr. Glegg, restored to good-humour by much hoeing, and moved by the sight of his wife's empty chair, with her knitting rolled up in the corner, went upstairs to her, and observed that the bell had been tolling for poor Mr. Morton, Mrs. Glegg answered magnanimously, quite as if she had been an uninjured woman, "Ah! then, there'll be a good business for somebody to take to."

Baxter had been open at least eight hours by this time, for it was nearly five o'clock; and if people are to quarrel often, it follows as a corollary that their quarrels cannot be protracted beyond certain limits.

Mr. and Mrs. Glegg talked quite amicably about the Tullivers that evening. Mr. Glegg went the length of admitting that Tulliver was a sad man for getting into hot water, and was like enough to run through his property; and Mrs. Glegg, meeting this acknowledgment half-way, declared that it was beneath her to take notice of such a man's conduct, and that, for her sister's sake, she would let him keep the five hundred a while longer, for when she put it out on a mortgage she should only get four per cent.

CHAPTER XIII

Mr. Tulliver Further Entangles the Skein of Life

Owing to this new adjustment of Mrs. Glegg's thoughts, Mrs. Pullet found her task of mediation the next day surprisingly easy. Mrs. Glegg, indeed, checked her rather sharply for thinking it would be necessary to tell her eldest sister what was the right mode of behaviour in family matters. Mrs. Pullet's argument, that it would look ill in the neighbourhood if people should have it in their power to say that there was a quarrel in the family, was particularly offensive. If the family name never suffered except through Mrs. Glegg, Mrs. Pullet might lay her head on her pillow in perfect confidence.

"It's not to be expected, I suppose," observed Mrs. Glegg, by way of winding up the subject, "as I shall go to the mill again before Bessy comes to see me, or as I shall go and fall down o' my knees to Mr. Tulliver, and ask his pardon for showing him favours; but I shall bear no malice, and when Mr. Tulliver speaks civil to me, I'll speak civil to him. Nobody has any call to tell me what's becoming."

Finding it unnecessary to plead for the Tullivers, it was natural that aunt Pullet should relax a little in her anxiety for them, and recur to the annoyance she had suffered yesterday from the offspring of that apparently ill-fated house. Mrs. Glegg heard a circumstantial narrative, to which Mr. Pullet's remarkable memory furnished some items; and while aunt Pullet pitied poor Bessy's bad-luck with her children, and expressed a half-formed project of paying for Maggie's being sent to a distant boarding-school, which would not prevent her being so brown, but might tend to subdue some other vices in her, aunt Glegg blamed Bessy for her weakness, and appealed to all witnesses who should be living when the Tulliver children had turned out ill, that she, Mrs. Glegg, had always

said how it would be from the very first, observing that it was wonderful to herself how all her words came true.

"Then I may call and tell Bessy you'll bear no malice, and everything be as it was before?" Mrs. Pullet said, just before parting.

"Yes, you may, Sophy," said Mrs. Glegg; "you may tell Mr. Tulliver, and Bessy too, as I'm not going to behave ill because folks behave ill to me: I know it's my place, as the eldest, to set an example in every respect, and I do it. Nobody can say different of me, if they'll keep to the truth."

Mrs. Glegg being in this state of satisfaction in her own lofty magnanimity, I leave you to judge what effect was produced on her by the reception of a short letter from Mr. Tulliver, that very evening, after Mrs. Pullet's departure, informing her that she needn't trouble her mind about her five hundred pounds, for it should be paid back to her in the course of the next month at farthest, together with the interest due thereon until the time of payment. And furthermore, that Mr. Tulliver had no wish to behave uncivilly to Mrs. Glegg, and she was welcome to his house whenever she liked to come, but he desired no favours from her, either for himself or his children.

It was poor Mrs. Tulliver who had hastened this catastrophe, entirely through that irrepressible hopefulness of hers which led her to expect that similar causes may at any time produce different results. It had very often occurred in her experience that Mr. Tulliver had done something because other people had said he was not able to do it, or had pitied him for his supposed inability, or in any other way piqued his pride; still, she thought to-day, if she told him when he came in to tea that sister Pullet was gone to try and make everything up with sister Glegg, so that he needn't think about paying in the money, it would give a cheerful effect to the meal. Mr. Tulliver had never slackened in his resolve to raise the money, but now he at once determined to write a letter to Mrs. Glegg which should cut off all possibility of mistake. Mrs. Pullet gone to beg and pray for *him* indeed! Mr. Tulliver did not willingly write a letter, and found the relation between spoken and written language, briefly

known as spelling, one of the most puzzling things in this puzzling world. Nevertheless, like all fervid writing, the task was done in less time than usual, and if the spelling differed from Mrs. Glegg's—why she belonged, like himself, to a generation with whom spelling was a matter of private judgment.

Mrs. Glegg did not alter her will in consequence of this letter, and cut off the Tulliver children from their sixth and seventh share in her thousand pounds; for she had her principles. No one must be able to say of her when she was dead that she had not divided her money with perfect fairness among her own kin: in the matter of wills, personal qualities were subordinate to the great fundamental fact of blood; and to be determined in the distribution of your property by caprice, and not make your legacies bear a direct ratio to degrees of kinship, was a prospective disgrace that would have embittered her life. This had always been a principle in the Dodson family; it was one form of that sense of honour and rectitude which was a proud tradition in such families—a tradition which has been the salt of our provincial society.

But though the letter could not shake Mrs. Glegg's principles, it made the family breach much more difficult to mend; and as to the effect it produced on Mrs. Glegg's opinion of Mr. Tulliver—she begged to be understood from that time forth that she had nothing whatever to say about him: his state of mind, apparently, was too corrupt for her to contemplate it for a moment. It was not until the evening before Tom went to school, at the beginning of August, that Mrs. Glegg paid a visit to her sister Tulliver, sitting in her gig all the while, and showing her displeasure by markedly abstaining from all advice and criticism, for, as she observed to her sister Deane, "Bessy must bear the consequence o' having such a husband, though I'm sorry for her," and Mrs. Deane agreed that Bessy was pitiable.

That evening Tom observed to Maggie, "O my! Maggie, aunt Glegg's beginning to come again; I'm glad I'm going to school. *You'll* catch it all now!"

Maggie was already so full of sorrow at the thought of Tom's going away from her, that this playful exultation of his seemed very

unkind, and she cried herself to sleep that night.

Mr. Tulliver's prompt procedure entailed on him further promptitude in finding the convenient person who was desirous of lending five hundred pounds on bond. "It must be no client of Wakem's," he said to himself; and yet at the end of a fortnight it turned out to the contrary; not because Mr. Tulliver's will was feeble, but because external fact was stronger. Wakem's client was the only convenient person to be found. Mr. Tulliver had a destiny as well as Œ dipus, and in this case he might plead, like Œ dipus, that his deed was inflicted on him rather than committed by him.

BOOK SECOND

SCHOOL-TIME

CHAPTER I

Tom's "First Half"

Tom Tulliver's sufferings during the first quarter he was at King's Lorton, under the distinguished care of the Rev. Walter Stelling, were rather severe. At Mr. Jacobs' academy, life had not presented itself to him as a difficult problem: there were plenty of fellows to play with, and Tom being good at all active games—fighting especially—had that precedence among them which appeared to him inseparable from the personality of Tom Tulliver. Mr. Jacobs himself, familiarly known as Old Goggles, from his habit of wearing spectacles, imposed no painful awe; and if it was the property of snuffy old hypocrites like him to write like copperplate and surround their signatures with arabesques, to spell without forethought, and to spout "My name is Norval" without bungling, Tom, for his part, was rather glad he was not in danger of those mean accomplishments. He was not going to be a snuffy schoolmaster—he; but a substantial man, like his father, who used to go hunting when he was younger, and rode a capital black mare —as pretty a bit of horse-flesh as ever you saw: Tom had heard what her points were a hundred times. *He* meant to go hunting too, and to be generally respected. When people were grown up, he considered, nobody inquired about their writing and spelling: when he was a man, he should be master of everything, and do just as he liked. It had been very difficult for him to reconcile himself to the idea that his school-time was to be prolonged, and that he was not to be brought up to his father's business, which he had always thought extremely pleasant, for it was nothing but riding about, giving orders, and going to market; and he thought that a clergyman would give him a great many Scripture lessons, and probably make him learn the Gospel and Epistle on a Sunday as well as the Collect. But in the absence of specific information, it was impossible for him to imagine that school and a schoolmaster would be something

entirely different from the academy of Mr. Jacobs. So, not to be at a deficiency, in case of his finding genial companions, he had taken care to carry with him a small box of percussion-caps; not that there was anything particular to be done with them, but they would serve to impress strange boys with a sense of his familiarity with guns. Thus poor Tom, though he saw very clearly through Maggie's illusions, was not without illusions of his own, which were to be cruelly dissipated by his enlarged experience at King's Lorton.

He had not been there a fortnight before it was evident to him that life, complicated not only with the Latin grammar but with a new standard of English pronunciation, was a very difficult business, made all the more obscure by a thick mist of bashfulness. Tom, as you have observed, was never an exception among boys for ease of address; but the difficulty of enunciating a monosyllable in reply to Mr. or Mrs. Stelling was so great, that he even dreaded to be asked at table whether he would have more pudding. As to the percussion-caps, he had almost resolved, in the bitterness of his heart, that he would throw them into a neighbouring pond; for not only was he the solitary pupil, but he began even to have a certain scepticism about guns, and a general sense that his theory of life was undermined. For Mr. Stelling thought nothing of guns, or horses either, apparently; and yet it was impossible for Tom to despise Mr. Stelling as he had despised Old Goggles. If there were anything that was not thoroughly genuine about Mr. Stelling, it lay quite beyond Tom's power to detect it: it is only by a wide comparison of facts that the wisest full-grown man can distinguish well-rolled barrels from more supernal thunder.

Mr. Stelling was a well-sized, broad-chested man, not yet thirty, with flaxen hair standing erect, and large lightish-grey eyes, which were always very wide open; he had a sonorous bass voice, and an air of defiant self-confidence inclining to brazenness. He had entered on his career with great vigour, and intended to make a considerable impression on his fellowmen. The Rev. Walter Stelling was not a man who would remain among the "inferior clergy" all his life. He had a true British determination to push his way in the

world. As a schoolmaster, in the first place; for there were capital masterships of grammar-schools to be had, and Mr. Stelling meant to have one of them. But as a preacher also, for he meant always to preach in a striking manner, so as to have his congregation swelled by admirers from neighbouring parishes, and to produce a great sensation whenever he took occasional duty for a brother clergyman of minor gifts. The style of preaching he had chosen was the extemporaneous, which was held little short of the miraculous in rural parishes like King's Lorton. Some passages of Massillon and Bourdaloue, which he knew by heart, were really very effective when rolled out in Mr. Stelling's deepest tones; but as comparatively feeble appeals of his own were delivered in the same loud and impressive manner, they were often thought quite as striking by his hearers. Mr. Stelling's doctrine was of no particular school; if anything, it had a tinge of evangelicalism, for that was "the telling thing" just then in the diocese to which King's Lorton belonged. In short, Mr. Stelling was a man who meant to rise in his profession, and to rise by merit, clearly, since he had no interest beyond what might be promised by a problematic relationship to a great lawyer who had not yet become Lord Chancellor. A clergyman who has such vigorous intentions naturally gets a little into debt at starting; it is not to be expected that he will live in the meagre style of a man who means to be a poor curate all his life, and if the few hundreds Mr. Timpson advanced towards his daughter's fortune did not suffice for the purchase of handsome furniture, together with a stock of wine, a grand piano, and the laying-out of a superior flower-garden, it followed in the most rigorous manner, either that these things must be procured by some other means, or else that the Rev. Mr. Stelling must go without them—which last alternative would be an absurd procrastination of the fruits of success, where success was certain. Mr. Stelling was so broad-chested and resolute that he felt equal to anything; he would become celebrated by shaking the consciences of his hearers, and he would by-and-by edit a Greek play, and invent several new readings. He had not yet selected the play, for having been married little more than two years, his leisure time had been much occupied with attentions to Mrs. Stelling; but

he had told that fine woman what he meant to do some day, and she felt great confidence in her husband, as a man who understood everything of that sort.

But the immediate step to future success was to bring on Tom Tulliver during this first half-year; for, by a singular coincidence, there had been some negotiation concerning another pupil from the same neighbourhood, and it might further a decision in Mr. Stelling's favour, if it were understood that young Tulliver, who, Mr. Stelling observed in conjugal privacy, was rather a rough cub, had made prodigious progress in a short time. It was on this ground that he was severe with Tom about his lessons: he was clearly a boy whose powers would never be developed through the medium of the Latin grammar, without the application of some sternness. Not that Mr. Stelling was a harsh-tempered or unkind man—quite the contrary: he was jocose with Tom at table, and corrected his provincialisms and his deportment in the most playful manner; but poor Tom was only the more cowed and confused by this double novelty, for he had never been used to jokes at all like Mr. Stelling's; and for the first time in his life he had a painful sense that he was all wrong somehow. When Mr. Stelling said, as the roast-beef was being uncovered, "Now, Tulliver! which would you rather decline, roast-beef or the Latin for it?"—Tom, to whom in his coolest moments a pun would have been a hard nut, was thrown into a state of embarrassed alarm that made everything dim to him except the feeling that he would rather not have anything to do with Latin: of course he answered, "Roast-beef," whereupon there followed much laughter and some practical joking with the plates, from which Tom gathered that he had in some mysterious way refused beef, and, in fact, made himself appear "a silly." If he could have seen a fellow-pupil undergo these painful operations and survive them in good spirits, he might sooner have taken them as a matter of course. But there are two expensive forms of education, either of which a parent may procure for his son by sending him as solitary pupil to a clergyman: one is, the enjoyment of the reverend gentleman's undivided neglect; the other is, the endurance of the

reverend gentleman's undivided attention. It was the latter privilege for which Mr. Tulliver paid a high price in Tom's initiatory months at King's Lorton.

That respectable miller and maltster had left Tom behind, and driven homeward in a state of great mental satisfaction. He considered that it was a happy moment for him when he had thought of asking Riley's advice about a tutor for Tom. Mr. Stelling's eyes were so wide open, and he talked in such an offhand, matter-of-fact way—answering every difficult slow remark of Mr. Tulliver's with, "I see, my good sir, I see;" "To be sure, to be sure;" "You want your son to be a man who will make his way in the world,"—that Mr. Tulliver was delighted to find in him a clergyman whose knowledge was so applicable to the everyday affairs of this life. Except Counsellor Wylde, whom he had heard at the last sessions, Mr. Tulliver thought the Rev. Mr. Stelling was the shrewdest fellow he had ever met with—not unlike Wylde, in fact: he had the same way of sticking his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat. Mr. Tulliver was not by any means an exception in mistaking brazenness for shrewdness: most laymen thought Stelling shrewd, and a man of remarkable powers generally: it was chiefly by his clerical brethren that he was considered rather a dull fellow. But he told Mr. Tulliver several stories about "Swing" and incendiarism, and asked his advice about feeding pigs in so thoroughly secular and judicious a manner, with so much polished glibness of tongue, that the miller thought, here was the very thing he wanted for Tom. He had no doubt this first-rate man was acquainted with every branch of information, and knew exactly what Tom must learn in order to become a match for the lawyers—which poor Mr. Tulliver himself did *not* know, and so was necessarily thrown for self-direction on this wide kind of inference. It is hardly fair to laugh at him, for I have known much more highly-instructed persons than he make inferences quite as wide, and not at all wiser.

As for Mrs. Tulliver—finding that Mrs. Stelling's views as to the airing of linen and the frequent recurrence of hunger in a growing boy, entirely coincided with her own; moreover, that Mrs. Stelling,

though so young a woman, and only anticipating her second confinement, had gone through very nearly the same experience as herself with regard to the behaviour and fundamental character of the monthly nurse—she expressed great contentment to her husband, when they drove away, at leaving Tom with a woman who, in spite of her youth, seemed quite sensible and motherly, and asked advice as prettily as could be.

"They must be very well off, though," said Mrs. Tulliver, "for everything's as nice as can be all over the house, and that watered-silk she had on cost a pretty penny. Sister Pullet has got one like it."

"Ah," said Mr. Tulliver, "he's got some income besides the curacy, I reckon. Perhaps her father allows 'em something. There's Tom 'ull be another hundred to him, and not much trouble either, by his own account: he says teaching comes natural to him. That's wonderful, now," added Mr. Tulliver, turning his head on one side, and giving his horse a meditative tickling on the flank.

Perhaps it was because teaching came naturally to Mr. Stelling, that he set about it with that uniformity of method and independence of circumstances, which distinguish the actions of animals understood to be under the immediate teaching of nature. Mr. Broderip's amiable beaver, as that charming naturalist tells us, busied himself as earnestly in constructing a dam, in a room up three pair of stairs in London, as if he had been laying his foundation in a stream or lake in Upper Canada. It was "Binny's" function to build: the absence of water or of possible progeny was an accident for which he was not accountable. With the same unerring instinct Mr. Stelling set to work at his natural method of instilling the Eton Grammar and Euclid into the mind of Tom Tulliver. This, he considered, was the only basis of solid instruction: all other means of education were mere charlatanism, and could produce nothing better than smatterers. Fixed on this firm basis, a man might observe the display of various or special knowledge made by irregularly educated people with a pitying smile: all that sort of thing was very well, but it was impossible these people could form sound opinions. In holding this conviction Mr. Stelling was not

biassed, as some tutors have been, by the excessive accuracy or extent of his own scholarship; and as to his views about Euclid, no opinion could have been freer from personal partiality. Mr. Stelling was very far from being led astray by enthusiasm, either religious or intellectual; on the other hand, he had no secret belief that everything was humbug. He thought religion was a very excellent thing, and Aristotle a great authority, and deaneries and prebends useful institutions, and Great Britain the providential bulwark of Protestantism, and faith in the unseen a great support to afflicted minds: he believed in all these things, as a Swiss hotelkeeper believes in the beauty of the scenery around him, and in the pleasure it gives to artistic visitors. And in the same way Mr. Stelling believed in his method of education: he had no doubt that he was doing the very best thing for Mr. Tulliver's boy. Of course, when the miller talked of "mapping" and "summing" in a vague and diffident manner, Mr. Stelling had set his mind at rest by an assurance that he understood what was wanted; for how was it possible the good man could form any reasonable judgment about the matter? Mr. Stelling's duty was to teach the lad in the only right way—indeed, he knew no other: he had not wasted his time in the acquirement of anything abnormal.

He very soon set down poor Tom as a thoroughly stupid lad; for though by hard labour he could get particular declensions into his brain, anything so abstract as the relation between cases and terminations could by no means get such a lodgment there as to enable him to recognise a chance genitive or dative. This struck Mr. Stelling as something more than natural stupidity: he suspected obstinacy, or at any rate, indifference; and lectured Tom severely on his want of thorough application. "You feel no interest in what you're doing, sir," Mr. Stelling would say, and the reproach was painfully true. Tom had never found any difficulty in discerning a pointer from a setter, when once he had been told the distinction, and his perceptive powers were not at all deficient. I fancy they were quite as strong as those of the Rev. Mr. Stelling; for Tom could predict with accuracy what number of horses were cantering behind

him, he could throw a stone right into the centre of a given ripple, he could guess to a fraction how many lengths of his stick it would take to reach across the playground, and could draw almost perfect squares on his slate without any measurement. But Mr. Stelling took no note of these things: he only observed that Tom's faculties failed him before the abstractions hideously symbolised to him in the pages of the Eton Grammar, and that he was in a state bordering on idiocy with regard to the demonstration that two given triangles must be equal—though he could discern with great promptitude and certainty the fact that they *were* equal. Whence Mr. Stelling concluded that Tom's brain being peculiarly impervious to etymology and demonstrations, was peculiarly in need of being ploughed and harrowed by these patent implements: it was his favourite metaphor, that the classics and geometry constituted that culture of the mind which prepared it for the reception of any subsequent crop. I say nothing against Mr. Stelling's theory: if we are to have one regimen for all minds, his seems to me as good as any other. I only know it turned out as uncomfortably for Tom Tulliver as if he had been plied with cheese in order to remedy a gastric weakness which prevented him from digesting it. It is astonishing what a different result one gets by changing the metaphor! Once call the brain an intellectual stomach, and one's ingenious conception of the classics and geometry as ploughs and harrows seems to settle nothing. But then it is open to some one else to follow great authorities, and call the mind a sheet of white paper or a mirror, in which case one's knowledge of the digestive process becomes quite irrelevant. It was doubtless an ingenious idea to call the camel the ship of the desert, but it would hardly lead one far in training that useful beast. O Aristotle! if you had had the advantage of being "the freshest modern" instead of the greatest ancient, would you not have mingled your praise of metaphorical speech, as a sign of high intelligence, with a lamentation that intelligence so rarely shows itself in speech without metaphor,—that we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else?

Tom Tulliver, being abundant in no form of speech, did not use any metaphor to declare his views as to the nature of Latin: he never called it an instrument of torture; and it was not until he had got on some way in the next half-year, and in the Delectus, that he was advanced enough to call it a “bore” and “beastly stuff.” At present, in relation to this demand that he should learn Latin declensions and conjugations, Tom was in a state of as blank unimaginativeness concerning the cause and tendency of his sufferings, as if he had been an innocent shrew mouse imprisoned in the split trunk of an ash-tree in order to cure lameness in cattle. It is doubtless almost incredible to instructed minds of the present day that a boy of twelve, not belonging strictly to “the masses,” who are now understood to have the monopoly of mental darkness, should have had no distinct idea how there came to be such a thing as Latin on this earth: yet so it was with Tom. It would have taken a long while to make conceivable to him that there ever existed a people who bought and sold sheep and oxen, and transacted the everyday affairs of life, through the medium of this language, and still longer to make him understand why he should be called upon to learn it, when its connection with those affairs had become entirely latent. So far as Tom had gained any acquaintance with the Romans at Mr. Jacobs’ academy, his knowledge was strictly correct, but it went no farther than the fact that they were “in the New Testament;” and Mr. Stelling was not the man to enfeeble and emasculate his pupil’s mind by simplifying and explaining, or to reduce the tonic effect of etymology by mixing it with smattering, extraneous information, such as is given to girls.

Yet, strange to say, under this vigorous treatment Tom became more like a girl than he had ever been in his life before. He had a large share of pride, which had hitherto found itself very comfortable in the world, despising old Goggles, and reposing in the sense of unquestioned rights; but now this same pride met with nothing but bruises and crushings. Tom was too clear-sighted not to be aware that Mr. Stelling’s standard of things was quite different, was certainly something higher in the eyes of the world than that of

the people he had been living amongst, and that, brought in contact with it, he, Tom Tulliver, appeared uncouth and stupid: he was by no means indifferent to this, and his pride got into an uneasy condition which quite nullified his boyish self-satisfaction, and gave him something of the girl's susceptibility. He was of a very firm, not to say obstinate disposition, but there was no brute-like rebellion and recklessness in his nature: the human sensibilities predominated, and if it had occurred to him that he could enable himself to show some quickness at his lessons, and so acquire Mr. Stelling's approbation, by standing on one leg for an inconvenient length of time, or rapping his head moderately against the wall, or any voluntary action of that sort, he would certainly have tried it. But no—Tom had never heard that these measures would brighten the understanding, or strengthen the verbal memory; and he was not given to hypothesis and experiment. It did occur to him that he could perhaps get some help by praying for it; but as the prayers he said every evening were forms learned by heart, he rather shrank from the novelty and irregularity of introducing an extempore passage on a topic of petition for which he was not aware of any precedent. But one day when he had broken down, for the fifth time, in the supines of the third conjugation, and Mr. Stelling, convinced that this must be carelessness, since it transcended the bounds of possible stupidity, had lectured him very seriously, pointing out that if he failed to seize the present golden opportunity of learning supines, he would have to regret it when he became a man,—Tom, more miserable than usual, determined to try his sole resource; and that evening, after his usual form of prayer for his parents and "little sister" (he had begun to pray for Maggie when she was a baby), and that he might be able always to keep God's commandments, he added, in the same low whisper, "and please to make me always remember my Latin." He paused a little to consider how he should pray about Euclid—whether he should ask to see what it meant, or whether there was any other mental state which would be more applicable to the case. But at last he added—"And make Mr. Stelling say I shan't do Euclid any more. Amen."

The fact that he got through his supines without mistake the next day, encouraged him to persevere in this appendix to his prayers, and neutralised any scepticism that might have arisen from Mr. Stelling's continued demand for Euclid. But his faith broke down under the apparent absence of all help when he got into the irregular verbs. It seemed clear that Tom's despair under the caprices of the present tense did not constitute a *nodus* worthy of interference, and since this was the climax of his difficulties, where was the use of praying for help any longer? He made up his mind to this conclusion in one of his dull, lonely evenings, which he spent in the study, preparing his lessons for the morrow. His eyes were apt to get dim over the page—though he hated crying, and was ashamed of it: he couldn't help thinking with some affection even of Spouncer, whom he used to fight and quarrel with; he would have felt at home with Spouncer, and in a condition of superiority. And then the mill, and the river, and Yap pricking up his ears, ready to obey the least sign when Tom said "Hoigh!" would all come before him in a sort of calenture, when his fingers played absently in his pocket with his great knife and his coil of whip-cord, and other relics of the past. Tom, as I said, had never been so much like a girl in his life before, and at that epoch of irregular verbs his spirit was further depressed by a new means of mental development, which had been thought of for him out of school hours. Mrs. Stelling had lately had her second baby, and as nothing could be more salutary for a boy than to feel himself useful, Mrs. Stelling considered she was doing Tom a service by setting him to watch the little cherub Laura while the nurse was occupied with the sickly baby. It was quite a pretty employment for Tom to take little Laura out in the sunniest hour of the autumn day—it would help to make him feel that Lorton Parsonage was a home for him, and that he was one of the family. The little cherub Laura, not being an accomplished walker at present, had a ribbon fastened round her waist, by which Tom held her as if she had been a little dog during the minutes in which she chose to walk; but as these were rare, he was for the most part carrying this fine child round and round the garden, within sight of Mrs. Stelling's window—according to orders. If any one

considers this unfair and even oppressive towards Tom, I beg him to consider that there are feminine virtues which are with difficulty combined, even if they are not incompatible. When the wife of a poor curate contrives, under all her disadvantages, to dress extremely well, and to have a style of coiffure which requires that her nurse shall occasionally officiate as lady's-maid,—when, moreover, her dinner-parties and her drawing-room show that effort at elegance and completeness of appointment to which ordinary women might imagine a large income necessary, it would be unreasonable to expect of her that she should employ a second nurse, or even act as a nurse herself. Mr. Stelling knew better: he saw that his wife did wonders already, and was proud of her: it was certainly not the best thing in the world for young Tulliver's gait to carry a heavy child, but he had plenty of exercise in long walks with himself, and next half-year Mr. Stelling would see about having a drilling-master. Among the many means whereby Mr. Stelling intended to be more fortunate than the bulk of his fellow-men, he had entirely given up that of having his own way in his own house. What then? he had married "as kind a little soul as ever breathed," according to Mr. Riley, who had been acquainted with Mrs. Stelling's blond ringlets and smiling demeanour throughout her maiden life, and on the strength of that knowledge would have been ready any day to pronounce that whatever domestic differences might arise in her married life must be entirely Mr. Stelling's fault.

If Tom had had a worse disposition, he would certainly have hated the little cherub Laura, but he was too kind-hearted a lad for that—there was too much in him of the fibre that turns to true manliness, and to protecting pity for the weak. I am afraid he hated Mrs. Stelling, and contracted a lasting dislike to pale blond ringlets and broad plaits, as directly associated with haughtiness of manner, and a frequent reference to other people's "duty." But he couldn't help playing with little Laura, and liking to amuse her: he even sacrificed his percussion-caps for her sake, in despair of their ever serving a greater purpose—thinking the small flash and bang would delight her, and thereby drawing down on himself a rebuke from

Mrs. Stelling for teaching her child to play with fire. Laura was a sort of playfellow—and O how Tom longed for playfellows! In his secret heart he yearned to have Maggie with him, and was almost ready to dote on her exasperating acts of forgetfulness; though, when he was at home, he always represented it as a great favour on his part to let Maggie trot by his side on his pleasure excursions.

And before this dreary half-year was ended, Maggie actually came. Mrs. Stelling had given a general invitation for the little girl to come and stay with her brother: so when Mr. Tulliver drove over to King's Lorton late in October, Maggie came too, with the sense that she was taking a great journey, and beginning to see the world. It was Mr. Tulliver's first visit to see Tom, for the lad must learn not to think too much about home.

"Well, my lad," he said to Tom, when Mr. Stelling had left the room to announce the arrival to his wife, and Maggie had begun to kiss Tom freely, "you look rarely! School agrees with you."

Tom wished he had looked rather ill.

"I don't think I *am* well, father," said Tom; "I wish you'd ask Mr. Stelling not to let me do Euclid—it brings on the toothache, I think."

(The toothache was the only malady to which Tom had ever been subject.)

"Euclid, my lad—why, what's that?" said Mr. Tulliver.

"O, I don't know: it's definitions, and axioms, and triangles, and things. It's a book I've got to learn in—there's no sense in it."

"Go, go!" said Mr. Tulliver, reprovingly, "you mustn't say so. You must learn what your master tells you. He knows what it's right for you to learn."

"I'll help you now, Tom," said Maggie, with a little air of patronising consolation. "I'm come to stay ever so long, if Mrs. Stelling asks me. I've brought my box and my pinafores, haven't I, father?"

"*You* help me, you silly little thing!" said Tom, in such high spirits at this announcement that he quite enjoyed the idea of confounding

Maggie by showing her a page of Euclid. “I should like to see you doing one of *my* lessons! Why, I learn Latin too! Girls never learn such things. They’re too silly.”

“I know what Latin is very well,” said Maggie, confidently. “Latin’s a language. There are Latin words in the Dictionary. There’s bonus, a gift.”

“Now, you’re just wrong there, Miss Maggie!” said Tom, secretly astonished. “You think you’re very wise! But ‘bonus’ means ‘good,’ as it happens—bonus, bona, bonum.”

“Well, that’s no reason why it shouldn’t mean ‘gift,’ ” said Maggie, stoutly. “It may mean several things—almost every word does. There’s ‘lawn,’—it means the grass-plot, as well as the stuffpocket-handkerchiefs are made of.”

“Well done, little ’un,” said Mr. Tulliver, laughing, while Tom felt rather disgusted with Maggie’s knowingness, though beyond measure cheerful at the thought that she was going to stay with him. Her conceit would soon be overawed by the actual inspection of his books.

Mrs. Stelling, in her pressing invitation, did not mention a longer time than a week for Maggie’s stay; but Mr. Stelling, who took her between his knees, and asked her where she stole her dark eyes from, insisted that she must stay a fortnight. Maggie thought Mr. Stelling was a charming man, and Mr. Tulliver was quite proud to leave his little wench where she would have an opportunity of showing her cleverness to appreciating strangers. So it was agreed that she should not be fetched home till the end of the fortnight.

“Now, then, come with me into the study, Maggie,” said Tom, as their father drove away. “What do you shake and toss your head now for, you silly?” he continued; for though her hair was now under a new dispensation, and was brushed smoothly behind her ears, she seemed still in imagination to be tossing it out of her eyes. “It makes you look as if you were crazy.”

“O, I can’t help it,” said Maggie, impatiently. “Don’t tease me, Tom. O, what books!” she exclaimed, as she saw the bookcases in

the study. “How I should like to have as many books as that!”

“Why, you couldn’t read one of ’em,” said Tom, triumphantly. “They’re all Latin.”

“No, they aren’t,” said Maggie. “I can read the back of this.… History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.”

“Well, what does that mean? *You* don’t know,” said Tom, wagging his head.

“But I could soon find out,” said Maggie, scornfully.

“Why, how?”

“I should look inside, and see what it was about.”

“You’d better not, Miss Maggie,” said Tom, seeing her hand on the volume. “Mr. Stelling lets nobody touch his books without leave, and *I* shall catch it, if you take it out.”

“O, very well! Let me see all *your* books, then,” said Maggie, turning to throw her arms round Tom’s neck, and rub his cheek with her small round nose.

Tom, in the gladness of his heart at having dear old Maggie to dispute with and crow over again, seized her round the waist, and began to jump with her round the large library table. Away they jumped with more and more vigour, till Maggie’s hair flew from behind her ears, and twirled about like an animated mop. But the revolutions round the table became more and more irregular in their sweep, till at last reaching Mr. Stelling’s reading-stand, they sent it thundering down with its heavy lexicons to the floor. Happily it was the ground-floor, and the study was a one-storied wing to the house, so that the downfall made no alarming resonance, though Tom stood dizzy and aghast for a few minutes, dreading the appearance of Mr. or Mrs. Stelling.

“O, I say, Maggie,” said Tom at last, lifting up the stand, “we must keep quiet here, you know. If we break anything, Mrs. Stelling’ll make us cry peccavi.”

“What’s that?” said Maggie.

“O, it’s the Latin for a good scolding,” said Tom, not without some pride in his knowledge.

“Is she a cross woman?” said Maggie.

“I believe you!” said Tom, with an emphatic nod.

“I think all women are crosser than men,” said Maggie. “Aunt Glegg’s a great deal crosser that Uncle Glegg, and mother scolds me more than father does.”

“Well, *you’ll* be a woman some day,” said Tom, “so *you* needn’t talk.”

“But I shall be a *clever* woman,” said Maggie, with a toss.

“O, I daresay, and a nasty conceited thing. Everybody ’ll hate you.”

“But you oughtn’t to hate me, Tom: it’ll be very wicked of you, for I shall be your sister.”

“Yes, but if you’re a nasty disagreeable thing, I *shall* hate you.”

“O but, Tom, you won’t! I shan’t be disagreeable. I shall be very good to you—and I shall be good to everybody. You won’t hate me really, will you, Tom?”

“O, bother! never mind! Come, it’s time for me to learn my lessons. See here! what I’ve got to do,” said Tom, drawing Maggie towards him and showing her his theorem, while she pushed her hair behind her ears, and prepared herself to prove her capability of helping him in Euclid. She began to read with full confidence in her own powers, but presently, becoming quite bewildered, her face flushed with irritation. It was unavoidable—she must confess her incompetency, and she was not fond of humiliation.

“It’s nonsense!” she said, “and very ugly stuff—nobody need want to make it out.”

“Ah, there now, Miss Maggie!” said Tom, drawing the book away, and wagging his head at her, “you see you’re not so clever as you thought you were.”

“O,” said Maggie, pouting, “I daresay I could make it out, if I’d learned what goes before, as you have.”

“But that’s what you just couldn’t, Miss Wisdom,” said Tom. “For it’s all the harder when you know what goes before: for then you’ve got to say what definition 3. is and what axiom V. is. But get along with you now: I must go on with this. Here’s the Latin Grammar. See what you can make of that.”

Maggie found the Latin Grammar quite soothing after her mathematical mortification; for she delighted in new words, and quickly found that there was an English Key at the end, which would make her very wise about Latin, at slight expense. She presently made up her mind to skip the rules in the Syntax—the examples became so absorbing. These mysterious sentences, snatched from an unknown context,—like strange horns of beasts, and leaves of unknown plants, brought from some far-off region,—gave boundless scope to her imagination, and were all the more fascinating because they were in a peculiar tongue of their own, which she could learn to interpret. It was really very interesting—the Latin Grammar that Tom had said no girls could learn: and she was proud because she found it interesting. The most fragmentary examples were her favourites. *Mors omnibus est communis* would have been jejune, only she liked to know the Latin; but the fortunate gentleman whom every one congratulated because he had a son “endowed with *such* a disposition” afforded her a great deal of pleasant conjecture, and she was quite lost in the “thick grove penetrable by no star,” when Tom called out,

“Now, then, Magsie, give us the Grammar!”

“O, Tom, it’s such a pretty book!” she said, as she jumped out of the large arm-chair to give it him; “it’s much prettier than the Dictionary. I could learn Latin very soon. I don’t think it’s at all hard.”

“O, I know what you’ve been doing,” said Tom; “you’ve been reading the English at the end. Any donkey can do that.”

Tom seized the book and opened it with a determined and business-like air, as much as to say that he had a lesson to learn which no donkeys would find themselves equal to. Maggie, rather piqued, turned to the bookcases to amuse herself with puzzling out the titles.

Presently Tom called to her: “Here, Magsie, come and hear if I can say this. Stand at that end of the table, where Mr. Stelling sits when he hears me.”

Maggie obeyed, and took the open book.

“Where do you begin, Tom?”

“O, I begin at *‘Appellativa arborum’* because I say all over again what I’ve been learning this week.”

Tom sailed along pretty well for three lines; and Maggie was beginning to forget her office of prompter in speculating as to what *mas* could mean, which came twice over, when he stuck fast at *Sunt etiam volucrum*.

“Don’t tell me, Maggie; *Sunt etiam volucrum … Sunt etiam volucrum … utostrea, cetus…*”

“No,” said Maggie, opening her mouth and shaking her head.

“Sunt etiam volucrum,” said Tom, very slowly, as if the next words might be expected to come sooner when he gave them this strong hint that they were waited for.

“C, e, u,” said Maggie, getting impatient.

“O, I know—hold your tongue,” said Tom. *“Ceu passer, hirundo; Ferarum.… Ferarum …”* Tom took his pencil and made several hard dots with it on his book-cover.… *“jerarum.…”*

“O dear, O dear, Tom,” said Maggie, “what a time you are! *Ut.…*”

“Ut, ostrea.…”

“No, no,” said Maggie, *“ut, tigris.…”*

“O yes, now I can do,” said Tom; “it was *tigris, vulpes*, I’d forgotten: *ut tigris, vulpes; et Piscium.”*

With some further stammering and repetition, Tom got through the next few lines.

"Now, then," he said, "the next is what I've just learnt for tomorrow. Give me hold of the book a minute."

After some whispered gabbling, assisted by the beating of his fist on the table, Tom returned the book.

"Mascula nomina in a," he began.

"No, Tom," said Maggie, "that doesn't come next. It's *Nomen non creskens genittivo.…"*

"Creskens genittivo," exclaimed Tom, with a derisive laugh, for Tom had learned this omitted passage for his yesterday's lesson, and a young gentleman does not require an intimate or extensive acquaintance with Latin before he can feel the pitiable absurdity of a false quantity. *"Creskens genittivo!* What a little silly you are, Maggie!"

"Well, you needn't laugh, Tom, for you didn't remember it at all. I'm sure it's spelt so; how was I to know?"

"Phee-e-e-h! I told you girls couldn't learn Latin. It's *Nomen non crescens genittivo."*

"Very well, then," said Maggie, pouting. "I can say that as well as you can. And you don't mind your stops. For you ought to stop twice as long at a semicolon as you do at a comma, and you make the longest stops where there ought to be no stop at all."

"O, well, don't chatter. Let me go on."

They were presently fetched to spend the rest of the evening in the drawing-room, and Maggie became so animated with Mr. Stelling, who, she felt sure, admired her cleverness, that Tom was rather amazed and alarmed at her audacity. But she was suddenly subdued by Mr. Stelling's alluding to a little girl of whom he had heard that she once ran away to the gypsies.

"What a very odd little girl that must be!" said Mrs. Stelling, meaning to be playful—but a playfulness that turned on her supposed oddity was not at all to Maggie's taste. She feared that Mr.

Stelling, after all, did not think much of her, and went to bed in rather low spirits. Mrs. Stelling, she felt, looked at her as if she thought her hair was very ugly because it hung down straight behind.

Nevertheless it was a very happy fortnight to Maggie, this visit to Tom. She was allowed to be in the study while he had his lessons, and in her various readings got very deep into the examples in the Latin Grammar. The astronomer who hated women generally, caused her so much puzzling speculation that she one day asked Mr. Stelling if all astronomers hated women, or whether it was only this particular astronomer. But, forestalling his answer, she said,

"I suppose it's all astronomers: because, you know, they live up in high towers, and if the women came there, they might talk and hinder them from looking at the stars."

Mr. Stelling liked her prattle immensely, and they were on the best terms. She told Tom she should like to go to school to Mr. Stelling, as he did, and learn just the same things. She knew she could do Euclid, for she had looked into it again, and she saw what A B C meant: they were the names of the lines.

"I'm sure you couldn't do it, now," said Tom; "and I'll just ask Mr. Stelling if you could."

"I don't mind," said the little conceited minx. "I'll ask him myself."

"Mr. Stelling," she said, that same evening when they were in the drawing-room, "couldn't I do Euclid, and all Tom's lessons, if you were to teach me instead of him?"

"No; you couldn't," said Tom, indignantly. "Girls can't do Euclid: can they, sir?"

"They can pick up a little of everything, I daresay," said Mr. Stelling. "They've a great deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow."

Tom, delighted with this verdict, telegraphed his triumph by wagging his head at Maggie behind Mr. Stelling's chair. As for

Maggie, she had hardly ever been so mortified. She had been so proud to be called “quick” all her little life, and now it appeared that this quickness was the brand of inferiority. It would have been better to be slow, like Tom.

“Ha, ha! Miss Maggie!” said Tom, when they were alone; “you see it’s not such a fine thing to be quick. You’ll never go far into anything, you know.”

And Maggie was so oppressed by this dreadful destiny that she had no spirit for a retort.

But when this small apparatus of shallow quickness was fetched away in the gig by Luke, and the study was once more quite lonely for Tom, he missed her grievously. He had really been brighter, and had got through his lessons better, since she had been there; and she had asked Mr. Stelling so many questions about the Roman empire, and whether there really ever was a man who said, in Latin, “I would not buy it for a farthing or a rotten nut,” or whether that had only been turned into Latin, that Tom had actually come to a dim understanding of the fact that there had once been people upon the earth who were so fortunate as to know Latin without learning it through the medium of the Eton Grammar. This luminous idea was a great addition to his historical acquirements during this half-year, which were otherwise confined to an epitomised history of the Jews.

But the dreary half-year *did* come to an end. How glad Tom was to see the last yellow leaves fluttering before the cold wind! The dark afternoons, and the first December snow, seemed to him far livelier than the August sunshine; and that he might make himself the surer about the flight of the days that were carrying him homeward, he stuck twenty-one sticks deep in a corner of the garden, when he was three weeks from the holidays, and pulled one up every day with a great wrench, throwing it to a distance with a vigour of will which would have carried it to limbo, if it had been in the nature of sticks to travel so far.

But it was worth purchasing, even at the heavy price of the Latin Grammar—the happiness of seeing the bright light in the parlour at

home, as the gig passed noiselessly over the snow-covered bridge: the happiness of passing from the cold air to the warmth and the kisses and the smiles of that familiar hearth, where the pattern of the rug and the grate and the fire-irons were “first ideas” that it was no more possible to criticise than the solidity and extension of matter. There is no sense of ease like the ease we felt in those scenes where we were born, where objects became dear to us before we had known the labour of choice, and where the outer world seemed only an extension of our own personality: we accepted and loved it as we accepted our own sense of existence and our own limbs. Very commonplace, even ugly, that furniture of our early home might look if it were put up to auction; an improved taste in upholstery scorns it; and is not the striving after something better and better in our surroundings, the grand characteristic that distinguishes man from the brute—or, to satisfy a scrupulous accuracy of definition, that distinguishes the British man from the foreign brute? But heaven knows where that striving might lead us, if our affections had not a trick of twining round those old inferior things—if the loves and sanctities of our life had no deep immovable roots in memory. One’s delight in an elderberry bush overhanging the confused leafage of a hedgerow bank, as a more gladdening sight than the finest cistus or fuchsia spreading itself on the softest undulating turf, is an entirely unjustifiable preference to a nursery-gardener, or to any of those severely regulated minds who are free from the weakness of any attachment that does not rest on a demonstrable superiority of qualities. And there is no better reason for preferring this elderberry bush than that it stirs an early memory —that it is no novelty in my life, speaking to me merely through my present sensibilities to form and colour, but the long companion of my existence, that wove itself into my joys when joys were vivid.

CHAPTER II

The Christmas Holidays

Fine old Christmas, with the snowy hair and ruddy face, had done his duty that year in the noblest fashion, and had set off his rich gifts of warmth and colour with all the heightening contrast of frost and snow.

Snow lay on the croft and river-bank in undulations softer than the limbs of infancy; it lay with the neatliest finished border on every sloping roof, making the dark-red gables stand out with a new depth of colour; it weighed heavily on the laurels and fir-trees, till it fell from them with a shuddering sound; it clothed the rough turnip-field with whiteness, and made the sheep look like dark blotches; the gates were all blocked up with the sloping drifts, and here and there a disregarded four-footed beast stood as if petrified "in unrecumbent sadness"; there was no gleam, no shadow, for the heavens, too, were one still, pale cloud—no sound or motion in anything but the dark river that flowed and moaned like an unresting sorrow. But old Christmas smiled as he laid this cruel-seeming spell on the out-door world, for he meant to light up home with new brightness, to deepen all the richness of in-door colour, and give a keener edge of delight to the warm fragrance of food: he meant to prepare a sweet imprisonment that would strengthen the primitive fellowship of kindred, and make the sunshine of familiar human faces as welcome as the hidden day-star. His kindness fell but hardly on the homeless—fell but hardly on the homes where the hearth was not very warm, and where the food had little fragrance; where the human faces had no sunshine in them, but rather the leaden, blank-eyed gaze of unexpectant want. But the fine old season meant well; and if he has not learnt the secret how to bless men impartially, it is because his father Time, with ever-unrelenting

purpose, still hides that secret in his own mighty, slow-beating heart.

And yet this Christmas day, in spite of Tom's fresh delight in home, was not, he thought, somehow or other, quite so happy as it had always been before. The red berries were just as abundant on the holly, and he and Maggie had dressed all the windows and mantelpieces and picture-frames on Christmas eve with as much taste as ever, wedding the thick-set scarlet clusters with branches of the black-berried ivy. There had been singing under the windows after midnight—supernatural singing, Maggie always felt, in spite of Tom's contemptuous insistence that the singers were old Patch, the parish clerk, and the rest of the church choir: she trembled with awe when their caroling broke in upon her dreams, and the image of men in fustian clothes was always thrust away by the vision of angels resting on the parted cloud. The midnight chant had helped as usual to lift the morning above the level of common days; and then there was the smell of hot toast and ale from the kitchen, at the breakfast hour; the favourite anthem, the green boughs, and the short sermon, gave the appropriate festal character to the church-going; and aunt and uncle Moss, with all their seven children, were looking like so many reflectors of the bright parlour-fire, when the church-goers came back, stamping the snow from their feet. The plum-pudding was of the same handsome roundness as ever, and came in with the symbolic blue flames around it, as if it had been heroically snatched from the nether fires into which it had been thrown by dyspeptic Puritans; the dessert was as splendid as ever, with its golden oranges, brown nuts, and the crystalline light and dark of apple jelly and damson cheese: in all these things Christmas was as it had always been since Tom could remember; it was only distinguished, if by anything, by superior sliding and snowballs.

Christmas was cheery, but not so Mr. Tulliver. He was irate and defiant, and Tom, though he espoused his father's quarrels and shared his father's sense of injury, was not without some of the feeling that oppressed Maggie when Mr. Tulliver got louder and more angry in narration and assertion with the increased leisure of

dessert. The attention that Tom might have concentrated on his nuts and wine was distracted by a sense that there were rascally enemies in the world, and that the business of grown-up life could hardly be conducted without a good deal of quarrelling. Now Tom was not fond of quarrelling, unless it could soon be put an end to by a fair stand-up fight with an adversary whom he had every chance of thrashing; and his father's irritable talk made him uncomfortable, though he never accounted to himself for the feeling, or conceived the notion that his father was faulty in this respect.

The particular embodiment of the evil principle now exciting Mr. Tulliver's determined resistance was Mr. Pivart, who, having lands higher up the Ripple, was taking measures for their irrigation, which either were, or would be, or were bound to be (on the principle that water was water), an infringement on Mr. Tulliver's legitimate share of water-power. Dix, who had a mill on the stream, was a feeble auxiliary of Old Harry compared with Pivart. Dix had been brought to his senses by arbitration, and Wakem's advice had not carried *him* far; no: Dix, Mr. Tulliver considered, had been as good as nowhere in point of law; and in the intensity of his indignation against Pivart, his contempt for a baffled adversary like Dix began to wear the air of a friendly attachment. He had no male audience to-day except Mr. Moss, who knew nothing, as he said, of the "natur' o' mills," and could only assent to Mr. Tulliver's arguments on the *a priori* ground of family relationship and monetary obligation; but Mr. Tulliver did not talk with the futile intention of convincing his audience—he talked to relieve himself; while good Mr. Moss made strong efforts to keep his eyes wide open, in spite of the sleepiness which an unusually good dinner produced in his hard-worked frame. Mrs. Moss, more alive to the subject, and interested in everything that affected her brother, listened and put in a word as often as maternal preoccupations allowed.

"Why, Pivart's a new name hereabout, brother, isn't it?" she said: "he didn't own the land in father's time, nor yours either, before I was married."

“New name? Yes—I should think it *is* a new name,” said Mr. Tulliver, with angry emphasis. “Dorlcote Mill’s been in our family a hundred year and better, and nobody ever heard of a Pivart meddling with the river, till this fellow came and bought Bincome’s farm out of hand, before anybody else could so much as say ‘snap.’ But I’ll *Pivart* him!” added Mr. Tulliver, lifting his glass with a sense that he had defined his resolution in an unmistakeable manner.

“You won’t be forced to go to law with him, I hope, brother?” said Mrs. Moss, with some anxiety.

“I don’t know what I shall be forced to; but I know what I shall force *him* to, with his dykes and erigations, if there’s any law to be brought to bear o’ the right side. I know well enough who’s at the bottom of it; he’s got Wakem to back him and egg him on. I know Wakem tells him the law can’t touch him for it, but there’s folks can handle the law besides Wakem. It takes a big raskil to beat him; but there’s bigger to be found, as know more o’ th’ ins and outs o’ the law, else how came Wakem to lose Brumley’s suit for him?”

Mr. Tulliver was a strictly honest man, and proud of being honest, but he considered that in law the ends of justice could only be achieved by employing a stronger knave to frustrate a weaker. Law was a sort of cock-fight, in which it was the business of injured honesty to get a game bird with the best pluck and the strongest spurs.

“Gore’s no fool—you needn’t tell me that,” he observed presently, in a pugnacious tone, as if poor Gritty had been urging that lawyer’s capabilities; “but, you see, he isn’t up to the law as Wakem is. And water’s a very particular thing—you can’t pick it up with a pitchfork. That’s why it’s been nuts to Old Harry and the lawyers. It’s plain enough what’s the rights and the wrongs of water, if you look at it straightforward; for a river’s a river, and if you’ve got a mill, you must have water to turn it; and it’s no use telling me, Pivart’s erigation and nonsense won’t stop my wheel; I know what belongs to water better than that. Talk to me o’ what th’ engineers say! I say it’s common sense, as Pivart’s dykes must do me an injury. But if that’s their engineering, I’ll put Tom to it by-and-by, and he

shall see if he can't find a bit more sense in th' engineering business than what *that* comes to."

Tom, looking round with some anxiety at this announcement of his prospects, unthinkingly withdrew a small rattle he was amusing Baby Moss with, whereupon she, being a baby that knew her own mind with remarkable clearness, instantaneously expressed her sentiments in a piercing yell, and was not to be appeased even by the restoration of the rattle, feeling apparently that the original wrong of having it taken from her remained in all its force. Mrs. Moss hurried away with her into another room, and expressed to Mrs. Tulliver, who accompanied her, the conviction that the dear child had good reasons for crying; implying that if it was supposed to be the rattle that baby clamoured for, she was a misunderstood baby. The thoroughly justifiable yell being quieted, Mrs. Moss looked at her sister-in-law and said—

"I'm sorry to see brother so put out about this water work."

"It's your brother's way, Mrs. Moss; I'd never anything o' that sort before I was married," said Mrs. Tulliver, with a half-implied reproach. She always spoke of her husband as "your brother" to Mrs. Moss in any case when his line of conduct was not matter of pure admiration. Amiable Mrs. Tulliver, who was never angry in her life, had yet her mild share of that spirit without which she could hardly have been at once a Dodson and a woman. Being always on the defensive towards her own sisters, it was natural that she should be keenly conscious of her superiority, even as the weakest Dodson, over a husband's sister, who, besides being poorly off, and inclined to "hang on" her brother, had the good-natured submissiveness of a large, easy-tempered, untidy, prolific woman, with affection enough in her not only for her own husband and abundant children, but for any number of collateral relations.

"I hope and pray he won't go to law," said Mrs. Moss, "for there's never any knowing where that'll end. And the right doesn't allays win. This Mr. Pivart's a rich man, by what I can make out, and the rich mostly get things their own way."

“As to that,” said Mrs. Tulliver, stroking her dress down, “I’ve seen what riches are in my own family; for my sisters have got husbands as can afford to do pretty much what they like. But I think sometimes I shall be drove off my head with the talk about this law and erigation; and my sisters lay all the fault to me, for they don’t know what it is to marry a man like your brother—how should they? Sister Pullet has her own way from morning till night.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Moss, “I don’t think I should like my husband if he hadn’t got any wits of his own, and I had to find head-piece for him. It’s a deal easier to do what pleases one’s husband, than to be puzzling what else one should do.”

“If people come to talk o’ doing what pleases their husbands,” said Mrs. Tulliver, with a faint imitation of her sister Glegg, “I’m sure your brother might have waited a long while before he’d have found a wife that ’ud have let him have his say in everything, as I do. It’s nothing but law and erigation now, from when we first get up in the morning till we go to bed at night; and I never contradict him; I only say—’Well, Mr. Tulliver, do as you like; but whativer you do, don’t go to law.’”

Mrs. Tulliver, as we have seen, was not without influence over her husband. No woman is; she can always incline him to do either what she wishes, or the reverse; and on the composite impulses that were threatening to hurry Mr. Tulliver into “law,” Mrs. Tulliver’s monotonous pleading had doubtless its share of force; it might even be comparable to that proverbial feather which has the credit or discredit of breaking the camel’s back; though, on a strictly impartial view, the blame ought rather to lie with the previous weight of feathers which had already placed the back in such imminent peril, that an otherwise innocent feather could not settle on it without mischief. Not that Mrs. Tulliver’s feeble beseeching could have had this feather’s weight in virtue of her single personality; but whenever she departed from entire assent to her husband, he saw in her the representative of the Dodson family; and it was a guiding principle with Mr. Tulliver, to let the Dodsons know that they were not to domineer over *him*, or—more specifically—

that a male Tulliver was far more than equal to four female Dodsons, even though one of them was Mrs. Glegg.

But not even a direct argument from that typical Dodson female herself against his going to law, could have heightened his disposition towards it so much as the mere thought of Wakem, continually freshened by the sight of the too able attorney on market-days. Wakem, to his certain knowledge, was (metaphorically speaking) at the bottom of Pivart's irrigation: Wakem had tried to make Dix stand out, and go to law about the dam: it was unquestionably Wakem who had caused Mr. Tulliver to lose the suit about the right of road and the bridge that made a thoroughfare of his land for every vagabond who preferred an opportunity of damaging private property to walking like an honest man along the high-road: all lawyers were more or less rascals, but Wakem's rascality was of that peculiarly aggravated kind which placed itself in opposition to that form of right embodied in Mr. Tulliver's interests and opinions. And as an extra touch of bitterness, the injured miller had recently, in borrowing the five hundred pounds, been obliged to carry a little business to Wakem's office on his own account. A hook-nosed glib fellow! as cool as a cucumber—always looking so sure of his game! And it was vexatious that Lawyer Gore was not more like him, but was a bald, round-featured man, with bland manners and fat hands; a game-cock that you would be rash to bet upon against Wakem. Gore was a sly fellow; his weakness did not lie on the side of scrupulosity: but the largest amount of winking, however significant, is not equivalent to seeing through a stone wall; and confident as Mr. Tulliver was in his principle that water was water, and in the direct inference that Pivart had not a leg to stand on in this affair of irrigation, he had an uncomfortable suspicion that Wakem had more law to show against this (rationally) irrefragable inference, than Gore could show for it. But then, if they went to law, there was a chance for Mr. Tulliver to employ Counsellor Wylde on his side, instead of having that admirable bully against him; and the prospect of seeing a witness of Wakem's made to perspire and become confounded, as Mr.

Tulliver's witness had once been, was alluring to the love of retributive justice.

Much rumination had Mr. Tulliver on these puzzling subjects during his rides on the grey horse—much turning of the head from side to side, as the scales dipped alternately; but the probable result was still out of sight, only to be reached through much hot argument and iteration in domestic and social life. That initial stage of the dispute which consisted in the narration of the case and the enforcement of Mr. Tulliver's views concerning it throughout the entire circle of his connections would necessarily take time, and at the beginning of February, when Tom was going to school again, there were scarcely any new items to be detected in his father's statement of the case against Pivart, or any more specific indication of the measures he was bent on taking against that rash contravener of the principle that water was water. Iteration, like friction, is likely to generate heat instead of progress, and Mr. Tulliver's heat was certainly more and more palpable. If there had been no new evidence on any other point, there had been new evidence that Pivart was as "thick as mud" with Wakem.

"Father," said Tom, one evening near the end of the holidays, "uncle Glegg says Lawyer Wakem *is* going to send his son to Mr. Stelling. It isn't true—what they said about his going to be sent to France. You won't like me to go to school with Wakem's son, shall you?"

"It's no matter for that, my boy," said Mr. Tulliver; "don't you learn anything bad of him, that's all. The lad's a poor deformed creatur, and takes after his mother in the face: I think there isn't much of his father in him. It's a sign Wakem thinks high o' Mr. Stelling, as he sends his son to him, and Wakem knows meal from bran."

Mr. Tulliver in his heart was rather proud of the fact that his son was to have the same advantages as Wakem's: but Tom was not at all easy on the point; it would have been much clearer if the lawyer's son had not been deformed, for then Tom would have had

the prospect of pitching into him with all that freedom which is derived from a high moral sanction.

CHAPTER III

The New Schoolfellow

It was a cold, wet January day on which Tom went back to school; a day quite in keeping with this severe phase of his destiny. If he had not carried in his pocket a parcel of sugar-candy and a small Dutch doll for little Laura, there would have been no ray of expected pleasure to enliven the general gloom. But he liked to think how Laura would put out her lips and her tiny hands for the bits of sugar-candy; and, to give the greater keenness to these pleasures of imagination, he took out the parcel, made a small hole in the paper, and bit off a crystal or two, which had so solacing an effect under the confined prospect and damp odours of the gig-umbrella, that he repeated the process more than once on his way.

"Well, Tulliver, we're glad to see you again," said Mr. Stelling, heartily. "Take off your wrappings and come into the study till dinner. You'll find a bright fire there, and a new companion."

Tom felt in an uncomfortable flutter as he took off his woollen comforter and other wrappings. He had seen Philip Wakem at St. Ogg's, but had always turned his eyes away from him as quickly as possible. He would have disliked having a deformed boy for his companion, even if Philip had not been the son of a bad man. And Tom did not see how a bad man's son could be very good. His own father was a good man, and he would readily have fought any one who said the contrary. He was in a state of mingled embarrassment and defiance as he followed Mr. Stelling to the study.

"Here is a new companion for you to shake hands with, Tulliver," said that gentleman on entering the study—"Master Philip Wakem. I shall leave you to make acquaintance by yourselves. You already know something of each other, I imagine; for you are neighbours at home."

Tom looked confused and awkward, while Philip rose and glanced at him timidly. Tom did not like to go up and put out his hand, and he was not prepared to say, “How do you do?” on so short a notice.

Mr. Stelling wisely turned away, and closed the door behind him: boys’ shyness only wears off in the absence of their elders.

Philip was at once too proud and too timid to walk towards Tom. He thought, or rather felt, that Tom had an aversion to looking at him: every one, almost, disliked looking at him: and his deformity was more conspicuous when he walked. So they remained without shaking hands or even speaking, while Tom went to the fire and warmed himself, every now and then casting furtive glances at Philip, who seemed to be drawing absently first one object and then another on a piece of paper he had before him. He had seated himself again, and as he drew, was thinking what he could say to Tom, and trying to overcome his own repugnance to making the first advances.

Tom began to look oftener and longer at Philip’s face, for he could see it without noticing the hump, and it was really not a disagreeable face—very old-looking, Tom thought. He wondered how much older Philip was than himself. An anatomist—even a mere physiognomist—would have seen that the deformity of Philip’s spine was not a congenital hump, but the result of an accident in infancy; but you do not expect from Tom any acquaintance with such distinctions: to him, Philip was simply a humpback. He had a vague notion that the deformity of Wakem’s son had some relation to the lawyer’s rascality, of which he had so often heard his father talk with hot emphasis; and he felt, too, a half-admitted fear of him as probably a spiteful fellow, who, not being able to fight you, had cunning ways of doing you a mischief by the sly. There was a humpbacked tailor in the neighbourhood of Mr. Jacobs’ academy, who was considered a very unamiable character, and was much hooted after by public-spirited boys solely on the ground of his unsatisfactory moral qualities; so that Tom was not without a basis of fact to go upon. Still, no face could be more unlike that ugly tailor’s than this melancholy boy’s face; the brown hair round it

waved and curled at the ends like a girl's: Tom thought that truly pitiable. This Wakem was a pale, puny fellow, and it was quite clear he would not be able to play at anything worth speaking of: but he handled his pencil in an enviable manner, and was apparently making one thing after another without any trouble. What was he drawing? Tom was quite warm now, and wanted something new to be going forward. It was certainly more agreeable to have an ill-natured humpback as a companion than to stand looking out of the study window at the rain, and kicking his foot against the washboard in solitude; something would happen every day—"a quarrel or something;" and Tom thought he should rather like to show Philip that he had better not try his spiteful tricks on him. He suddenly walked across the hearth, and looked over Philip's paper.

"Why, that's a donkey with panniers—and a spaniel, and partridges in the corn!" he exclaimed, his tongue being completely loosed by surprise and admiration. "O my buttons! I wish I could draw like that. I'm to learn drawing this half—I wonder if I shall learn to make dogs and donkeys!"

"O, you can do them without learning," said Philip; "I never learned drawing."

"Never learned?" said Tom, in amazement. "Why, when I make dogs and horses, and those things, the heads and the legs won't come right; though I can see how they ought to be very well. I can make houses, and all sorts of chimneys—chimneys going all down the wall, and windows in the roof, and all that. But I daresay I could do dogs and horses if I was to try more," he added, reflecting that Philip might falsely suppose that he was going to "knock under," if he were too frank about the imperfection of his accomplishments.

"O yes," said Philip, "it's very easy. You've only to look well at things, and draw them over and over again. What you do wrong once, you can alter the next time."

"But haven't you been taught anything?" said Tom, beginning to have a puzzled suspicion that Philip's crooked back might be the

source of remarkable faculties. “I thought you’d been to school a long while.”

“Yes,” said Philip, smiling, “I’ve been taught Latin, and Greek, and mathematics,—and writing, and such things.”

“O, but, I say, you don’t like Latin, though, do you?” said Tom, lowering his voice confidentially.

“Pretty well; I don’t care much about it,” said Philip.

“Ah, but perhaps you haven’t got into the *Propria quœ maribus,”* said Tom, nodding his head sideways, as much as to say, “that was the test: it was easy talking till you came to *that*.”

Philip felt some bitter complacency in the promising stupidity of this well-made active-looking boy; but made polite by his own extreme sensitiveness, as well as by his desire to conciliate, he checked his inclination to laugh, and said, quietly,

“I’ve done with the grammar; I don’t learn that any more.”

“Then you won’t have the same lessons as I shall?” said Tom, with a sense of disappointment.

“No; but I daresay I can help you. I shall be very glad to help you if I can.”

Tom did not say “Thank you,” for he was quite absorbed in the thought that Wakem’s son did not seem so spiteful a fellow as might have been expected.

“I say,” he said presently, “do you love your father?”

“Yes,” said Philip, colouring deeply; “don’t you love yours?”

“O yes … I only wanted to know,” said Tom, rather ashamed of himself, now he saw Philip colouring and looking uncomfortable. He found much difficulty in adjusting his attitude of mind towards the son of Lawyer Wakem, and it had occurred to him that if Philip disliked his father, that fact might go some way towards clearing up his perplexity.

“Shall you learn drawing now?” he said, by way of changing the subject.

“No,” said Philip. “My father wishes me to give all my time to other things now.”

“What! Latin, and Euclid, and those things?” said Tom.

“Yes,” said Philip, who had left off using his pencil, and was resting his head on one hand, while Tom was leaning forward on both elbows, and looking with increasing admiration at the dog and the donkey.

“And you don’t mind that?” said Tom, with strong curiosity.

“No: I like to know what everybody else knows. I can study what I like by-and-by.”

“I can’t think why anybody should learn Latin,” said Tom. “It’s no good.”

“It’s part of the education of a gentleman,” said Philip. “All gentlemen learn the same things.”

“What! do you think Sir John Crake, the master of the harriers, knows Latin?” said Tom, who had often thought he should like to resemble Sir John Crake.

“He learnt it when he was a boy, of course,” said Philip. “But I daresay he’s forgotten it.”

“O, well, I can do that, then,” said Tom, not with any epigrammatic intention, but with serious satisfaction at the idea that, as far as Latin was concerned, there was no hindrance to his resembling Sir John Crake. “Only you’re obliged to remember it while you’re at school, else you’ve got to learn ever so many lines of ‘Speaker.’ Mr. Stelling’s very particular—did you know? He’ll have you up ten times if you say ‘nam’ for ‘jam’…hewon’tlet you go a letter wrong, *I* can tell you.”

“O, I don’t mind,” said Philip, unable to choke a laugh; “I can remember things easily. And there are some lessons I’m very fond of. I’m very fond of Greek history and everything about the Greeks. I should like to have been a Greek and fought the Persians, and then have come home and have written tragedies, or else have been listened to by everybody for my wisdom, like Socrates, and have

died a grand death." (Philip, you perceive, was not without a wish to impress the well-made barbarian with a sense of his mental superiority.)

"Why, were the Greeks great fighters?" said Tom, who saw a vista in this direction. "Is there anything like David, and Goliath, and Samson, in the Greek history? Those are the only bits I like in the history of the Jews."

"O, there are very fine stories of that sort about the Greeks—about the heroes of early times who killed the wild beasts, as Samson did. And in the *Odyssey*—that's a beautiful poem—there's a more wonderful giant than Goliath—Polypheme, who had only one eye in the middle of his forehead; and Ulysses, a little fellow, but very wise and cunning, got a red-hot pine-tree and stuck it into this one eye, and made him roar like a thousand bulls."

"O, what fun!" said Tom, jumping away from the table, and stamping first with one leg and then the other. "I say, can you tell me all about those stories? Because I shan't learn Greek you know.… Shall I?" he added, pausing in his stamping with a sudden alarm, lest the contrary might be possible. "Does every gentleman learn Greek?…Will Mr. Stelling make me begin with it, do you think?"

"No, I should think not—very likely not," said Philip. "But you may read those stories without knowing Greek. I've got them in English."

"O, but I don't like reading; I'd sooner have you tell them me. But only the fighting ones, you know. My sister Maggie is always wanting to tell me stories—but they're stupid things. Girls' stories always are. Can you tell a good many fighting stories?"

"O yes," said Philip; "lots of them, besides the Greek stories. I can tell you about Richard Cœur-de-Lion and Saladin, and about William Wallace, and Robert Bruce, and James Douglas—I know no end."

"You're older than I am, aren't you?" said Tom.

"Why, how old are *you?* I'm fifteen."

“I’m only going in fourteen,” said Tom. “But I thrashed all the fellows at Jacobs’—that’s where I was before I came here. And I beat ’em all at bandy and climbing. And I wish Mr. Stelling would let us go fishing. *I* could show you how to fish. You *could* fish, couldn’t you? It’s only standing, and sitting still, you know.”

Tom, in his turn, wished to make the balance dip in his favour. This hunchback must not suppose that his acquaintance with fighting stories put him on a par with an actual fighting hero, like Tom Tulliver. Philip winced under this allusion to his unfitness for active sports, and he answered almost peevishly—

“I can’t bear fishing. I think people look like fools sitting watching a line hour after hour—or else throwing and throwing, and catching nothing.”

“Ah, but you wouldn’t say they looked like fools when they landed a big pike, I can tell you,” said Tom, who had never caught anything that was “big” in his life, but whose imagination was on the stretch with indignant zeal for the honour of sport. Wakem’s son, it was plain, had his disagreeable points, and must be kept in due check. Happily for the harmony of this first interview, they were now called to dinner, and Philip was not allowed to develop farther his unsound views on the subject of fishing. But Tom said to himself, that was just what he should have expected from a hunchback.

CHAPTER IV

'The Young Idea'

The alternations of feeling in that first dialogue between Tom and Philip continued to mark their intercourse even after many weeks of schoolboy intimacy. Tom never quite lost the feeling that Philip, being the son of a "rascal," was his natural enemy, never thoroughly overcame his repulsion to Philip's deformity: he was a boy who adhered tenaciously to impressions once received: as with all minds in which mere perception predominates over thought and emotion, the external remained to him rigidly what it was in the first instance. But then, it was impossible not to like Philip's company when he was in a good humour; he could help one so well in one's Latin exercises, which Tom regarded as a kind of puzzle that could only be found out by a lucky chance; and he could tell such wonderful fighting stories about Hal of the Wynd, for example, and other heroes who were especial favourites with Tom, because they laid about them with heavy strokes. He had small opinion of Saladin, whose scimitar could cut a cushion in two in an instant: who wanted to cut cushions? That was a stupid story, and he didn't care to hear it again. But when Robert Bruce, on the black pony, rose in his stirrups, and, lifting his good battle-axe, cracked at once the helmet and the skull of the too-hasty knight at Bannockburn, then Tom felt all the exaltation of sympathy, and if he had had a cocoa-nut at hand, he would have cracked it at once with the poker. Philip in his happier moods indulged Tom to the top of his bent, heightening the crash and bang and fury of every fight with all the artillery of epithets and similes at his command. But he was not always in a good humour or happy mood. The slight spurt of peevish susceptibility which had escaped him in their first interview, was a symptom of a perpetually-recurring mental ailment —half of it nervous irritability, half of it the heart-bitterness produced by the sense of his deformity. In these fits of susceptibility

every glance seemed to him to be charged either with offensive pity or with ill-repressed disgust—at the very least it was an indifferent glance, and Philip felt indifference as a child of the south feels the chill air of a northern spring. Poor Tom's blundering patronage when they were out of doors together would sometimes make him turn upon the well-meaning lad quite savagely; and his eyes, usually sad and quiet, would flash with anything but playful lightning. No wonder Tom retained his suspicions of the humpback.

But Philip's self-taught skill in drawing was another link between them; for Tom found, to his disgust, that his new drawing-master gave him no dogs and donkeys to draw, but brooks and rustic bridges and ruins, all with a general softness of black-lead surface, indicating that nature, if anything, was rather satiny; and as Tom's feeling for the picturesque in landscape was at present quite latent, it is not surprising that Mr. Goodrich's productions seemed to him an uninteresting form of art. Mr. Tulliver, having a vague intention that Tom should be put to some business which included the drawing out of plans and maps, had complained to Mr. Riley, when he saw him at Mudport, that Tom seemed to be learning nothing of that sort; whereupon that obliging adviser had suggested that Tom should have drawing-lessons. Mr. Tulliver must not mind paying extra for drawing: let Tom be made a good draughtsman, and he would be able to turn his pencil to any purpose. So it was ordered that Tom should have drawing-lessons; and whom should Mr. Stelling have selected as a master if not Mr. Goodrich, who was considered quite at the head of his profession within a circuit of twelve miles round King's Lorton? By which means Tom learned to make an extremely fine point to his pencil, and to represent landscape with a "broad generality," which, doubtless from a narrow tendency in his mind to details, he thought extremely dull.

All this, you remember, happened in those dark ages when there were no schools of design—before schoolmasters were invariably men of scrupulous integrity, and before the clergy were all men of enlarged minds and varied culture. In those less-favoured days, it is no fable that there were other clergymen besides Mr. Stelling who

had narrow intellects and large wants, and whose income, by a logical confusion to which Fortune, being a female as well as blindfold, is peculiarly liable, was proportioned not to their wants but to their intellect—with which income has clearly no inherent relation. The problem these gentlemen had to solve was to readjust the proportion between their wants and their income; and since wants are not easily starved to death, the simpler method appeared to be—to raise their income. There was but one way of doing this; any of those low callings in which men are obliged to do good work at a low price were forbidden to clergymen: was it their fault if their only resource was to turn out very poor work at a high price? Besides, how should Mr. Stelling be expected to know that education was a delicate and difficult business? any more than an animal endowed with a power of boring a hole through a rock should be expected to have wide views of excavation. Mr. Stelling's faculties had been early trained to boring in a straight line, and he had no faculty to spare. But among Tom's contemporaries, whose fathers cast their sons on clerical instruction to find them ignorant after many days, there were many far less lucky than Tom Tulliver. Education was almost entirely a matter of luck—usually of ill-luck—in those distant days. The state of mind in which you take a billiard-cue or a dice-box in your hand is one of sober certainty compared with that of old-fashioned fathers, like Mr. Tulliver, when they selected a school, or a tutor for their sons. Excellent men, who had been forced all their lives to spell on an impromptu-phonetic system, and having carried on a successful business in spite of this disadvantage, had acquired money enough to give their sons a better start in life than they had had themselves, must necessarily take their chance as to the conscience and the competence of the schoolmaster whose circular fell in their way, and appeared to promise so much more than they would ever have thought of asking for, including the return of linen, fork, and spoon. It was happy for them if some ambitious draper of their acquaintance had not brought up his son to the Church, and if that young gentleman, at the age of four-and-twenty, had not closed his college dissipations by an imprudent marriage: otherwise, these innocent fathers,

desirous of doing the best for their offspring, could only escape the draper's son by happening to be on the foundation of a grammar-school as yet unvisited by commissioners, where two or three boys could have, all to themselves, the advantages of a large and lofty building, together with a head master, toothless, dim-eyed, and deaf, whose erudite indistinctness and inattention were engrossed by them at the rate of three hundred pounds a-head—a ripe scholar, doubtless, when first appointed; but all ripeness beneath the sun has a further stage less esteemed in the market.

Tom Tulliver, then, compared with many other British youths of his time who have since had to scramble through life with some fragments of more or less relevant knowledge, and a great deal of strictly relevant ignorance, was not so very unlucky. Mr. Stelling was a broad-chested healthy man, with the bearing of a gentleman, a conviction that a growing boy required a sufficiency of beef and a certain hearty kindness in him that made him like to see Tom looking well and enjoying his dinner; not a man of refined conscience, or with any deep sense of the infinite issues belonging to everyday duties; not quite competent to his high offices; but incompetent gentlemen must live, and without private fortune it is difficult to see how they could all live genteelly if they had nothing to do with education or government. Besides, it was the fault of Tom's mental constitution that his faculties could not be nourished on the sort of knowledge Mr. Stelling had to communicate. A boy born with a deficient power of apprehending signs and abstractions must suffer the penalty of his congenital deficiency, just as if he had been born with one leg shorter than the other. A method of education sanctioned by the long practice of our venerable ancestors was not to give way before the exceptional dulness of a boy who was merely living at the time then present. And Mr. Stelling was convinced that a boy so stupid at signs and abstractions must be stupid at everything else, even if that reverend gentleman could have taught him everything else. It was the practice of our venerable ancestors to apply that ingenious instrument the thumb-screw, and to tighten and tighten it in order to elicit non-existent

facts; they had a fixed opinion to begin with, that the facts were existent, and what had they to do but to tighten the thumb-screw? In like manner, Mr. Stelling had a fixed opinion that all boys with any capacity could learn what it was the only regular thing to teach: if they were slow, the thumb-screw must be tightened—the exercises must be insisted on with increased severity, and a page of Virgil be awarded as a penalty, to encourage and stimulate a too languid inclination to Latin verse.

The thumb-screw was a little relaxed, however, during this second half-year. Philip was so advanced in his studies, and so apt, that Mr. Stelling could obtain credit by his facility, which required little help, much more easily than by the troublesome process of overcoming Tom's dulness. Gentlemen with broad chests and ambitious intentions do sometimes disappoint their friends by failing to carry the world before them. Perhaps it is, that high achievements demand some other unusual qualification besides an unusual desire for high prizes; perhaps it is that these stalwart gentlemen are rather indolent, their *divinæ particulum auræ* being obstructed from soaring by a too hearty appetite. Some reason or other there was why Mr. Stelling deferred the execution of many spirited projects—why he did not begin the editing of his Greek play, or any other work of scholarship, in his leisure hours, but, after turning the key of his private study with much resolution, sat down to one of Theodore Hook's novels. Tom was gradually allowed to shuffle through his lessons with less rigour, and having Philip to help him, he was able to make some show of having applied his mind in a confused and blundering way, without being cross-examined into a betrayal that his mind had been entirely neutral in the matter. He thought school much more bearable under this modification of circumstances; and he went on contentedly enough, picking up a promiscuous education chiefly from things that were not intended as education at all. What was understood to be his education, was simply the practice of reading, writing, and spelling, carried on by an elaborate appliance of unintelligible ideas, and by much failure in the effort to learn by rote.

Nevertheless, there was a visible improvement in Tom under this training; perhaps because he was not a boy in the abstract, existing solely to illustrate the evils of a mistaken education, but a boy made of flesh and blood, with dispositions not entirely at the mercy of circumstances.

There was a great improvement in his bearing, for example, and some credit on this score was due to Mr. Poulter, the village schoolmaster, who, being an old Peninsular soldier, was employed to drill Tom—a source of high mutual pleasure. Mr. Poulter, who was understood by the company at the Black Swan to have once struck terror into the hearts of the French, was no longer personally formidable. He had rather a shrunken appearance, and was tremulous in the mornings, not from age, but from the extreme perversity of the King's Lorton boys which nothing but gin could enable him to sustain with any firmness. Still, he carried himself with martial erectness, had his clothes scrupulously brushed, and his trousers tightly strapped; and on the Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, when he came to Tom, he was always inspired with gin and old memories, which gave him an exceptionally spirited air, as of a superannuated charger who hears the drum. The drilling-lessons were always protracted by episodes of warlike narrative, much more interesting to Tom than Philip's stories out of the *Iliad;* for there were no cannon in the *Iliad*, and, besides, Tom had felt some disgust on learning that Hector and Achilles might possibly never have existed. But the Duke of Wellington was really alive, and Bony had not been long dead—therefore Mr. Poulter's reminiscences of the Peninsular War were removed from all suspicion of being mythical. Mr. Poulter, it appeared, had been a conspicuous figure at Talavera, and had contributed not a little to the peculiar terror with which his regiment of infantry was regarded by the enemy. On afternoons, when his memory was more stimulated than usual, he remembered that the Duke of Wellington had (in strict privacy, lest jealousies should be awakened) expressed his esteem for that fine fellow Poulter. The very surgeon who attended him in the hospital after he had received his gunshot wound, had been profoundly impressed

with the superiority of Mr. Poulter's flesh: no other flesh would have healed in anything like the same time. On less personal matters connected with the important warfare in which he had been engaged, Mr. Poulter was more reticent, only taking care not to give the weight of his authority to any loose notions concerning military history. Any one who pretended to a knowledge of what occurred at the siege of Badajos, was especially an object of silent pity to Mr. Poulter; he wished that prating person had been run down, and had the breath trampled out of him at the first go-off, as he himself had —he might talk about the siege of Badajos then! Tom did not escape irritating his drilling-master occasionally, by his curiosity concerning other military matters than Mr. Poulter's personal experience.

"And General Wolfe, Mr. Poulter? wasn't he a wonderful fighter?" said Tom, who held the notion that all the martial heroes commemorated on the public-house signs were engaged in the war with Bony.

"Not at all!" said Mr. Poulter, contemptuously. "Nothing o' the sort!… Heads up!" he added, in a tone of stern command, which delighted Tom, and made him feel as if he were a regiment in his own person.

"No, no!" Mr. Poulter would continue, on coming to a pause in his discipline. "They'd better not talk to me about General Wolfe. He did nothing but die of his wound; that's a poor haction, I consider. Any other man 'ud have died o' the wounds I've had.… One of my sword-cuts 'ud ha' killed a fellow like General Wolfe."

"Mr. Poulter," Tom would say, at any allusion to the sword, "I wish you'd bring your sword and do the sword-exercise!"

For a long while Mr. Poulter only shook his head in a significant manner at this request, and smiled patronisingly, as Jupiter may have done when Semele urged her too ambitious request. But one afternoon, when a sudden shower of heavy rain had detained Mr. Poulter twenty minutes longer than usual at the Black Swan, the sword was brought—just for Tom to look at.

“And this is the real sword you fought with in all the battles, Mr. Poulter?” said Tom, handling the hilt. “Has it ever cut a Frenchman’s head off?”

“Head off? Ah! and would, if he’d had three heads.”

“But you had a gun and bayonet besides?” said Tom. “I should like the gun and bayonet best, because you could shoot ’em first and spear ’em after. Bang! Ps-s-s-s!” Tom gave the requisite pantomime to indicate the double enjoyment of pulling the trigger and thrusting the spear.

“Ah, but the sword’s the thing when you come to close fighting,” said Mr. Poulter, involuntarily falling in with Tom’s enthusiasm, and drawing the sword so suddenly that Tom leaped back with much agility.

“O but, Mr. Poulter, if you’re going to do the exercise,” said Tom, a little conscious that he had not stood his ground as became an Englishman, “let me go and call Philip. He’ll like to see you, you know.”

“What! the humpbacked lad?” said Mr. Poulter, contemptuously. “What’s the use of *his* looking on?”

“O but he knows a great deal about fighting,” said Tom, “and how they used to fight with bows and arrows, and battleaxes.”

“Let him come then. I’ll show him something different from his bows and arrows,” said Mr. Poulter, coughing, and drawing himself up, while he gave a little preliminary play to his wrist.

Tom ran in to Philip, who was enjoying his afternoon’s holiday at the piano, in the drawing-room, picking out tunes for himself and singing them. He was supremely happy, perched like an amorphous bundle on the high stool, with his head thrown back, his eyes fixed on the opposite cornice, and his lips wide open, sending forth, with all his might, impromptu syllables to a tune of Arne’s, which had hit his fancy.

“Come, Philip,” said Tom, bursting in; “don’t stay roaring ‘la la’ there—come and see old Poulter do his sword-exercise in the

carriage-house!”

The jar of this interruption—the discord of Tom’s tones coming across the notes to which Philip was vibrating in soul and body, would have been enough to unhinge his temper, even if there had been no question of Poulter the drilling-master; and Tom, in the hurry of seizing something to say to prevent Mr. Poulter from thinking he was afraid of the sword when he sprang away from it, had alighted on this proposition to fetch Philip—though he knew well enough that Philip hated to hear him mention his drilling-lessons. Tom would never have done so inconsiderate a thing except under the severe stress of his personal pride.

Philip shuddered visibly as he paused from his music. Then turning red, he said, with violent passion—

“Get away, you lumbering idiot! Don’t come bellowing at me—you’re not fit to speak to anything but a cart-horse!”

It was not the first time Philip had been made angry by him, but Tom had never before been assailed with verbal missiles that he understood so well.

“I’m fit to speak to something better than you—you poor-spirited imp!” said Tom, lighting up immediately at Philip’s fire. “You know I won’t hit you, because you’re no better than a girl. But I’m an honest man’s son, and *your* father’s a rogue—everybody says so!”

Tom flung out of the room, and slammed the door after him, made strangely heedless by his anger; for to slam doors within the hearing of Mrs. Stelling, who was probably not far off, was an offence only to be wiped out by twenty lines of Virgil. In fact, that lady did presently descend from her room, in double wonder at the noise and the subsequent cessation of Philip’s music. She found him sitting in a heap on the hassock, and crying bitterly.

“What’s the matter, Wakem? What was that noise about? Who slammed the door?”

Philip looked up, and hastily dried his eyes. “It was Tulliver who came in … to ask me to go out with him.”

“And what are you in trouble about?” said Mrs. Stelling.

Philip was not her favourite of the two pupils; he was less obliging than Tom, who was made useful in many ways. Still his father paid more than Mr. Tulliver did, and she meant him to feel that she behaved exceedingly well to him. Philip, however, met her advances towards a good understanding very much as a caressed mollusc meets an invitation to show himself out of his shell. Mrs. Stelling was not a loving, tender-hearted woman: she was a woman whose skirt sat well, who adjusted her waist and patted her curls with a preoccupied air when she inquired after your welfare. These things, doubtless, represent a great social power, but it is not the power of love—and no other power could win Philip from his personal reserve.

He said, in answer to her question, “My toothache came on, and made me hysterical again.”

This had been the fact once, and Philip was glad of the recollection—it was like an inspiration to enable him to excuse his crying. He had to accept eau-de-cologne, and to refuse creosote in consequence; but that was easy.

Meanwhile Tom, who had for the first time sent a poisoned arrow into Philip’s heart, had returned to the carriage-house, where he found Mr. Poulter, with a fixed and earnest eye, wasting the perfections of his sword-exercise on probably observant but inappreciative rats. But Mr. Poulter was a host in himself; that is to say, he admired himself more than a whole army of spectators could have admired him. He took no notice of Tom’s return, being too entirely absorbed in the cut and thrust—the solemn one, two, three, four; and Tom, not without a slight feeling of alarm at Mr. Poulter’s fixed eye and hungry-looking sword, which seemed impatient for something else to cut besides the air, admired the performance from as great a distance as possible. It was not until Mr. Poulter paused and wiped the perspiration from his forehead, that Tom felt the full charm of the sword-exercise, and wished it to be repeated.

“Mr. Poulter,” said Tom, when the sword was being finally sheathed, “I wish you’d lend me your sword a little while to keep.”

“No, no, young gentleman,” said Mr. Poulter, shaking his head decidedly, “you might do yourself some mischief with it.”

“No, I’m sure I wouldn’t—I’m sure I’d take care and not hurt myself. I shouldn’t take it out of the sheath much, but I could ground arms with it, and all that.”

“No, no, it won’t do, I tell you; it won’t do,” said Mr. Poulter, preparing to depart. “What ’ud Mr. Stelling say to me?”

“O, I say, do, Mr. Poulter! I’d give you my five-shilling piece if you’d let me keep the sword a week. Look here!” said Tom, reaching out the attractively large round of silver. The young dog calculated the effect as well as if he had been a philosopher.

“Well,” said Mr. Poulter, with still deeper gravity, “you must keep it out of sight, you know.”

“O yes, I’ll keep it under the bed,” said Tom, eagerly, “or else at the bottom of my large box.”

“And let me see, now, whether you can draw it out of the sheath without hurting yourself.”

That process having been gone through more than once, Mr. Poulter felt that he had acted with scrupulous conscientiousness, and said, “Well, now, Master Tulliver, if I take the crown-piece, it is to make sure as you’ll do no mischief with the sword.”

“O no, indeed, Mr. Poulter,” said Tom, delightedly handing him the crown-piece, and grasping the sword, which, he thought, might have been lighter with advantage.

“But if Mr. Stelling catches you carrying it in?” said Mr. Poulter, pocketing the crown-piece provisionally while he raised this new doubt.

“O, he always keeps in his up-stairs study on Saturday afternoons,” said Tom, who disliked anything sneaking, but was not disinclined to a little stratagem in a worthy cause. So he carried off the sword in triumph, mixed with dread—dread that he might

encounter Mr. or Mrs. Stelling—to his bedroom, where, after some consideration, he hid it in the closet behind some hanging clothes. That night he fell asleep in the thought that he would astonish Maggie with it when she came—tie it round his waist with his red comforter, and make her believe that the sword was his own, and that he was going to be a soldier. There was nobody but Maggie who would be silly enough to believe him, or whom he dared allow to know that he had a sword; and Maggie was really coming next week to see Tom, before she went to a boarding-school with Lucy.

If you think a lad of thirteen would not have been so childish, you must be an exceptionally wise man, who, although you are devoted to a civil calling, requiring you to look bland rather than formidable, yet never, since you had a beard, threw yourself into a martial attitude, and frowned before the looking-glass. It is doubtful whether our soldiers would be maintained if there were not pacific people at home who like to fancy themselves soldiers. War, like other dramatic spectacles, might possibly cease for want of a “public.”

CHAPTER V

Maggie's Second Visit

This last breach between the two lads was not readily mended, and for some time they spoke to each other no more than was necessary. Their natural antipathy of temperament made resentment an easy passage to hatred, and in Philip the transition seemed to have begun: there was no malignity in his disposition, but there was a susceptibility that made him peculiarly liable to a strong sense of repulsion. The ox—we may venture to assert it on the authority of a great classic—is not given to use his teeth as an instrument of attack; and Tom was an excellent bovine lad, who ran at questionable objects in a truly ingenious bovine manner; but he had blundered on Philip's tenderest point, and had caused him as much acute pain as if he had studied the means with the nicest precision and the most envenomed spite. Tom saw no reason why they should not make up this quarrel as they had done many others, by behaving as if nothing had happened; for though he had never before said to Philip that his father was a rogue, this idea had so habitually made part of his feeling as to the relation between himself and his dubious schoolfellow, whom he could neither like nor dislike, that the mere utterance did not make such an epoch to him as it did to Philip. And he had a right to say so, when Philip hectored over *him*, and called him names. But perceiving that his first advances towards amity were not met, he relapsed into his least favourable disposition towards Philip, and resolved never to appeal to him either about drawing or exercises again. They were only so far civil to each other as was necessary to prevent their state of feud from being observed by Mr. Stelling, who would have "put down" such nonsense with great vigour.

When Maggie came, however, she could not help looking with growing interest at the new schoolfellow, although he was the son

of that wicked Lawyer Wakem, who made her father so angry. She had arrived in the middle of school-hours, and had sat by while Philip went through his lessons with Mr. Stelling. Tom, some weeks ago, had sent her word that Philip knew no end of stories—not stupid stories like hers; and she was convinced now from her own observation that he must be very clever: she hoped he would think *her* rather clever too, when she came to talk to him. Maggie, moreover, had rather a tenderness for deformed things; she preferred the wry-necked lambs, because it seemed to her that the lambs which were quite strong and well made wouldn't mind so much about being petted; and she was especially fond of petting objects that would think it very delightful to be petted by her. She loved Tom very dearly, but she often wished that he *cared* more about her loving him.

"I think Philip Wakem seems a nice boy, Tom," she said, when they went out of the study together into the garden, to pass the interval before dinner. "He couldn't choose his father, you know; and I've read of very bad men who had good sons, as well as good parents who had bad children. And if Philip is good, I think we ought to be the more sorry for him because his father is not a good man. *You* like him, don't you?"

"O, he's a queer fellow," said Tom, curtly, "and he's as sulky as can be with me, because I told him his father was a rogue. And I'd a right to tell him so, for it was true—and *he* began it, with calling me names. But you stop here by yourself a bit, Magsie, will you? I've got something I want to do up-stairs."

"Can't I go too?" said Maggie, who, in this first day of meeting again, loved Tom's shadow.

"No, it's something I'll tell you about by-and-by, not yet," said Tom, skipping away.

In the afternoon the boys were at their books in the study, preparing the morrow's lessons, that they might have a holiday in the evening in honour of Maggie's arrival. Tom was hanging over his Latin grammar, moving his lips inaudibly like a strict but

impatient Catholic repeating his tale of paternosters; and Philip, at the other end of the room, was busy with two volumes, with a look of contented diligence that excited Maggie's curiosity; he did not look at all as if he were learning a lesson. She sat on a low stool at nearly a right angle with the two boys, watching first one and then the other; and Philip, looking off his book once towards the fireplace, caught the pair of questioning dark eyes fixed upon him. He thought this sister of Tulliver's seemed a nice little thing, quite unlike her brother; he wished *he* had a little sister. What was it, he wondered, that made Maggie's dark eyes remind him of the stories about princesses being turned into animals?… I think it was that her eyes were full of unsatisfied intelligence, and unsatisfied, beseeching affection.

"I say, Magsie," said Tom at last, shutting his books and putting them away with the energy and decision of a perfect master in the art of leaving off, "I've done my lessons now. Come up-stairs with me."

"What is it?" said Maggie, when they were outside the door, a slight suspicion crossing her mind as she remembered Tom's preliminary visit up-stairs. "It isn't a trick you're going to play me, now?"

"No, no, Maggie," said Tom, in his most coaxing tone; "it's something you'll like *ever so."*

He put his arm round her neck, and she put hers round his waist, and, twined together in this way, they went up-stairs.

"I say, Magsie, you must not tell anybody, you know," said Tom, "else I shall get fifty lines."

"Is it alive?" said Maggie, whose imagination had settled for the moment on the idea that Tom kept a ferret clandestinely.

"O, I shan't tell you," said he. "Now you go into that corner and hide your face, while I reach it out," he added, as he locked the bedroom door behind them. "I'll tell you when to turn round. You mustn't squeal out, you know."

“O, but if you frighten me, I shall,” said Maggie, beginning to look rather serious.

“You won’t be frightened, you silly thing,” said Tom. “Go and hide your face, and mind you don’t peep.”

“Of course I shan’t peep,” said Maggie, disdainfully; and she buried her face in the pillow like a person of strict honour.

But Tom looked round warily as he walked to the closet; then he stepped into the narrow space, and almost closed the door. Maggie kept her face buried without the aid of principle, for in that dream-suggestive attitude she had soon forgotten where she was, and her thoughts were busy with the poor deformed boy, who was so clever, when Tom called out, “Now then, Magsie!”

Nothing but long meditation and preconcerted arrangement of effects could have enabled Tom to present so striking a figure as he did to Maggie when she looked up. Dissatisfied with the pacific aspect of a face which had no more than the faintest hint of flaxen eyebrow, together with a pair of amiable blue-grey eyes and round pink cheeks that refused to look formidable, let him frown as he would before the looking-glass—(Philip had once told him of a man who had a horse-shoe frown, and Tom had tried with all his frowning-might to make a horse-shoe on his forehead)—he had had recourse to that unfailing source of the terrible, burnt cork, and had made himself a pair of black eyebrows that met in a satisfactory manner over his nose, and were matched by a less carefully adjusted blackness about the chin. He had wound a red handkerchief round his cloth cap to give it the air of a turban, and his red comforter across his breast as a scarf—an amount of red which, with the tremendous frown on his brow, and the decision with which he grasped the sword, as he held it with its point resting on the ground, would suffice to convey an approximative idea of his fierce and blood-thirsty disposition.

Maggie looked bewildered for a moment, and Tom enjoyed that moment keenly; but in the next, she laughed, clapped her hands

together, and said, “O Tom, you’ve made yourself like Bluebeard at the show.”

It was clear she had not been struck with the presence of the sword—it was not unsheathed. Her frivolous mind required a more direct appeal to its sense of the terrible, and Tom prepared for his master-stroke. Frowning with a double amount of intention, if not of corrugation, he (carefully) drew the sword from its sheath and pointed it at Maggie.

“O Tom, please don’t,” exclaimed Maggie, in a tone of suppressed dread, shrinking away from him into the opposite corner. “I *shall* scream—I’m sure I shall! O don’t. I wish I’d never come upstairs!”

The corners of Tom’s mouth showed an inclination to a smile of complacency that was immediately checked as inconsistent with the severity of a great warrior. Slowly he let down the scabbard on the floor, lest it should make too much noise, and then said, sternly,—

“I’m the Duke of Wellington! March!” stamping forward with the right leg a little bent, and the sword still pointing towards Maggie, who, trembling, and with tear-filled eyes, got upon the bed, as the only means of widening the space between them.

Tom, happy in this spectator of his military performances, even though the spectator was only Maggie, proceeded, with the utmost exertion of his force, to such an exhibition of the cut and thrust as would necessarily be expected of the Duke of Wellington.

“Tom, I *will not* bear it—I *will* scream,” said Maggie, at the first movement of the sword. “You’ll hurt yourself; you’ll cut your head off!”

“One—two,” said Tom, resolutely, though at “two” his wrist trembled a little. “Three,” came more slowly, and with it the sword swung downwards, and Maggie gave a loud shriek. The sword had fallen, with its edge on Tom’s foot, and in a moment after, he had fallen too. Maggie leaped from the bed, still shrieking, and immediately there was a rush of footsteps towards the room. Mr. Stelling, from his up-stairs study, was the first to enter. He found both the children on the floor. Tom had fainted, and Maggie was

shaking him by the collar of his jacket, screaming, with wild eyes. She thought he was dead, poor child! and yet she shook him, as if that would bring him back to life. In another minute she was sobbing with joy because Tom had opened his eyes: she couldn't sorrow yet that he had hurt his foot—it seemed as if all happiness lay in his being alive.

CHAPTER VI

A Love Scene

Poor Tom bore his severe pain heroically, and was resolute in not "telling" of Mr. Poulter more than was unavoidable: the five-shilling piece remained a secret even to Maggie. But there was a terrible dread weighing on his mind—so terrible that he dared not even ask the question which might bring the fatal "yes"—he dared not ask the surgeon or Mr. Stelling, "Shall I be lame, sir?" He mastered himself so as not to cry out at the pain, but when his foot had been dressed, and he was left alone with Maggie seated by his bedside, the children sobbed together with their heads laid on the same pillow. Tom was thinking of himself walking about on crutches, like the wheelwright's son; and Maggie, who did not guess what was in his mind, sobbed for company. It had not occurred to the surgeon or to Mr. Stelling to anticipate this dread in Tom's mind, and to reassure him by hopeful words. But Philip watched the surgeon out of the house, and waylaid Mr. Stelling to ask the very question that Tom had not dared to ask for himself.

"I beg your pardon, sir,—but does Mr. Askern say Tulliver will be lame?"

"O no, O no," said Mr. Stelling, "not permanently, only for a little while."

"Did he tell Tulliver so, sir, do you think?"

"No: nothing was said to him on the subject."

"Then may I go and tell him, sir?"

"Yes, to be sure: now you mention it, I daresay he may be troubling about that. Go to his bedroom, but be very quiet at present."

It had been Philip's first thought when he heard of the accident —"Will Tulliver be lame? It will be very hard for him if he is"—and

Tom's hitherto unforgiven offences were washed out by that pity. Philip felt that they were no longer in a state of repulsion, but were being drawn into a common current of suffering and sad privation. His imagination did not dwell on the outward calamity and its future effect on Tom's life, but it made vividly present to him the probable state of Tom's feeling. Philip had only lived fourteen years, but those years had, most of them, been steeped in the sense of a lot irremediably hard.

"Mr. Askern says you'll soon be all right again, Tulliver, did you know?" he said, rather timidly, as he stepped gently up to Tom's bed. "I've just been to ask Mr. Stelling, and he says you'll walk as well as ever again, by-and-by."

Tom looked up with that momentary stopping of the breath which comes with a sudden joy; then he gave a long sigh, and turned his blue-grey eyes straight on Philip's face, as he had not done for a fortnight or more. As for Maggie, this intimation of a possibility she had not thought of before, affected her as a new trouble; the bare idea of Tom's being always lame overpowered the assurance that such a misfortune was not likely to befall him, and she clung to him and cried afresh.

"Don't be a little silly, Magsie," said Tom, tenderly, feeling very brave now. "I shall soon get well."

"Good-bye, Tulliver," said Philip, putting out his small, delicate hand, which Tom clasped immediately with his more substantial fingers.

"I say," said Tom, "ask Mr. Stelling to let you come and sit with me sometimes, till I get up again, Wakem—and tell me about Robert Bruce, you know."

After that, Philip spent all his time out of school-hours with Tom and Maggie. Tom liked to hear fighting stories as much as ever, but he insisted strongly on the fact that those unhurt, great fighters, who did so many wonderful things and came off unhurt, wore excellent armour from head to foot, which made fighting easy work, he considered. He should not have hurt his foot if he had had an

iron shoe on. He listened with great interest to a new story of Philip's about a man who had a very bad wound in his foot, and cried out so dreadfully with the pain that his friends could bear with him no longer, but put him ashore on a desert island, with nothing but some wonderful poisoned arrows to kill animals with for food.

"I didn't roar out a bit, you know," Tom said, "and I daresay my foot was as bad as his. It's cowardly to roar."

But Maggie would have it that when anything hurt you very much, it was quite permissible to cry out, and it was cruel of people not to bear it. She wanted to know if Philoctetes had a sister, and why *she* didn't go with him on the desert island and take care of him.

One day, soon after Philip had told this story, he and Maggie were in the study alone together while Tom's foot was being dressed. Philip was at his books, and Maggie, after sauntering idly round the room, not caring to do anything in particular, because she would soon go to Tom again, went and leaned on the table near Philip to see what he was doing, for they were quite old friends now, and perfectly at home with each other.

"What are you reading about in Greek?" she said. "It's poetry—I can see that, because the lines are so short."

"It's about Philoctetes—the lame man I was telling you of yesterday," he answered, resting his head on his hand, and looking at her, as if he were not at all sorry to be interrupted. Maggie, in her absent way, continued to lean forward, resting on her arms and moving her feet about, while her dark eyes got more and more fixed and vacant, as if she had quite forgotten Philip and his book.

"Maggie," said Philip, after a minute or two, still leaning on his elbow and looking at her, "if you had had a brother like me, do you think you should have loved him as well as Tom?"

Maggie started a little on being roused from her reverie, and said, "What?" Philip repeated his question.

"O yes, better," she answered, immediately. "No, not better; because I don't think I *could* love you better than Tom. But I should

be so sorry—*so sorry* for you."

Philip coloured: he had meant to imply, would she love him as well in spite of his deformity, and yet when she alluded to it so plainly, he winced under her pity. Maggie, young as she was, felt her mistake. Hitherto she had instinctively behaved as if she were quite unconscious of Philip's deformity: her own keen sensitiveness and experience under family criticism sufficed to teach her this as well as if she had been directed by the most finished breeding.

"But you are so very clever, Philip, and you can play and sing," she added, quickly. "I wish you *were* my brother. I'm very fond of you. And you would stay at home with me when Tom went out, and you would teach me everything—wouldn't you? Greek and everything?"

"But you'll go away soon, and go to school, Maggie," said Philip, "and then you'll forget all about me, and not care for me any more. And then I shall see you when you're grown up, and you'll hardly take any notice of me."

"O no, I shan't forget you, I'm sure," said Maggie, shaking her head very seriously. "I never forget anything, and I think about everybody when I'm away from them. I think about poor Yap—he's got a lump in his throat, and Luke says he'll die. Only don't you tell Tom, because it will vex him so. You never saw Yap: he's a queer little dog—nobody cares about him but Tom and me."

"Do you care as much about me as you do about Yap, Maggie?" said Philip, smiling rather sadly.

"O yes, I should think so," said Maggie, laughing.

"I'm very fond of *you*, Maggie; I shall never forget *you,"* said Philip, "and when I'm very unhappy, I shall always think of you, and wish I had a sister with dark eyes, just like yours."

"Why do you like my eyes?" said Maggie, well pleased. She had never heard any one but her father speak of her eyes as if they had merit.

“I don’t know,” said Philip. “They’re not like any other eyes. They seem trying to speak—trying to speak kindly. I don’t like other people to look at me much, but I like you to look at me, Maggie.”

“Why, I think you’re fonder of me than Tom is,” said Maggie, rather sorrowfully. Then, wondering how she could convince Philip that she could like him just as well, although he was crooked, she said,

“Should you like me to kiss you, as I do Tom? I will, if you like.”

“Yes, very much: nobody kisses me.”

Maggie put her arm round his neck and kissed him quite earnestly.

“There now,” she said, “I shall always remember you, and kiss you when I see you again, if it’s ever so long. But I’ll go now, because I think Mr. Askern’s done with Tom’s foot.”

When their father came the second time, Maggie said to him, “O father, Philip Wakem is so very good to Tom—he is such a clever boy, and I *do* love him. And you love him too, Tom, don’t you! *Say* you love him,” she added, entreatingly.

Tom coloured a little as he looked at his father, and said, “I shan’t be friends with him when I leave school, father; but we’ve made it up now, since my foot has been bad, and he’s taught me to play at draughts, and I can beat him.”

“Well, well,” said Mr. Tulliver, “if he’s good to you, try and make him amends, and be good to *him*. He’s a poor crooked creatur, and takes after his dead mother. But don’t you be getting too thick with him—he’s got his father’s blood in him too. Ay, ay, the grey colt may chance to kick like his black sire.”

The jarring natures of the two boys effected what Mr. Tulliver’s admonition alone might have failed to effect: in spite of Philip’s new kindness, and Tom’s answering regard in this time of his trouble, they never became close friends. When Maggie was gone, and when Tom by-and-by began to walk about as usual, the friendly warmth that had been kindled by pity and gratitude died out by degrees,

and left them in their old relation to each other. Philip was often peevish and contemptuous; and Tom's more specific and kindly impressions gradually melted into the old background of suspicion and dislike towards him as a queer fellow, a humpback, and the son of a rogue. If boys and men are to be welded together in the glow of transient feeling, they must be made of metal that will mix, else they inevitably fall asunder when the heat dies out.

CHAPTER VII

The Golden Gates Are Passed

So Tom went on even to the fifth half-year—till he was turned sixteen—at King's Lorton, while Maggie was growing with a rapidity which her aunts considered highly reprehensible, at Miss Firniss's boarding-school in the ancient town of Laceham on the Floss, with cousin Lucy for her companion. In her early letters to Tom she had always sent her love to Philip, and asked many questions about him, which were answered by brief sentences about Tom's toothache, and a turf-house which he was helping to build in the garden, with other items of that kind. She was pained to hear Tom say in the holidays that Philip was as queer as ever again, and often cross: they were no longer very good friends, she perceived; and when she reminded Tom that he ought always to love Philip for being so good to him when his foot was bad, he answered, "Well, it isn't my fault: *I* don't do anything to him." She hardly ever saw Philip during the remainder of their school-life; in the Midsummer holidays he was always away at the seaside, and at Christmas she could only meet him at long intervals in the streets of St. Ogg's. When they did meet, she remembered her promise to kiss him, but, as a young lady who had been at a boarding-school, she knew now that such a greeting was out of the question, and Philip would not expect it. The promise was void, like so many other sweet, illusory promises of our childhood; void as promises made in Eden before the seasons were divided, and when the starry blossoms grew side by side with the ripening peach—impossible to be fulfilled when the golden gates had been passed.

But when their father was actually engaged in the long-threatened lawsuit, and Wakem, as the agent at once of Pivart and Old Harry, was acting against him, even Maggie felt, with some sadness, that they were not likely ever to have any intimacy with Philip again:

the very name of Wakem made her father angry, and she had once heard him say, that if that crook-backed son lived to inherit his father's ill-gotten gains, there would be a curse upon him. "Have as little to do with him at school as you can, my lad," he said to Tom; and the command was obeyed the more easily because Mr. Stelling by this time had two additional pupils; for though this gentleman's rise in the world was not of that meteor-like rapidity which the admirers of his extemporaneous eloquence had expected for a preacher whose voice demanded so wide a sphere, he had yet enough of growing prosperity to enable him to increase his expenditure in continued disproportion to his income.

As for Tom's school course, it went on with mill-like monotony, his mind continuing to move with a slow, half-stifled pulse in a medium of uninteresting or unintelligible ideas. But each vacation he brought home larger and larger drawings with the satiny rendering of landscape, and water-colours in vivid greens, together with manuscript books full of exercises and problems, in which the handwriting was all the finer because he gave his whole mind to it. Each vacation he brought home a new book or two, indicating his progress through different stages of history, Christian doctrine, and Latin literature; and that passage was not entirely without result, besides the possession of the books. Tom's ear and tongue had become accustomed to a great many words and phrases which are understood to be signs of an educated condition; and though he had never really applied his mind to any one of his lessons, the lessons had left a deposit of vague, fragmentary, ineffectual notions. Mr. Tulliver, seeing signs of acquirement beyond the reach of his own criticism, thought it was probably all right with Tom's education: he observed, indeed, that there were no maps, and not enough "summing;" but he made no formal complaint to Mr. Stelling. It was a puzzling business, this schooling; and if he took Tom away, where could he send him with better effect?

By the time Tom had reached his last quarter at King's Lorton, the years had made striking changes in him since the day we saw him returning from Mr. Jacobs' academy. He was a tall youth now,

carrying himself without the least awkwardness, and speaking without more shyness than was a becoming symptom of blended diffidence and pride: he wore his tail-coat and his stand-up collars, and watched the down on his lip with eager impatience, looking every day at his virgin razor, with which he had provided himself in the last holidays. Philip had already left—at the autumn quarter—that he might go to the south for the winter, for the sake of his health; and this change helped to give Tom the unsettled, exultant feeling that usually belongs to the last months before leaving school. This quarter, too, there was some hope of his father's lawsuit being decided: *that* made the prospect of home more entirely pleasurable. For Tom, who had gathered his view of the case from his father's conversation, had no doubt that Pivart would be beaten.

Tom had not heard anything from home for some weeks—a fact which did not surprise him, for his father and mother were not apt to manifest their affection in unnecessary letters—when, to his great surprise, on the morning of a dark cold day near the end of November, he was told, soon after entering the study at nine o'clock, that his sister was in the drawing-room. It was Mrs. Stelling who had come into the study to tell him, and she left him to enter the drawing-room alone.

Maggie, too, was tall now, with braided and coiled hair: she was almost as tall as Tom, though she was only thirteen; and she really looked older than he did at that moment. She had thrown off her bonnet, her heavy braids were pushed back from her forehead, as if it would not bear that extra load, and her young face had a strangely worn look, as her eyes turned anxiously towards the door. When Tom entered she did not speak, but only went up to him, put her arms round his neck, and kissed him earnestly. He was used to various moods of hers, and felt no alarm at the unusual seriousness of her greeting.

Why, how is it you're come so early this cold morning, Maggie? Did you come in the gig?" said Tom, as she backed towards the sofa, and drew him to her side.

"No, I came by the coach. I've walked from the turnpike."

“But how is it you’re not at school? The holidays have not begun yet?”

“Father wanted me at home,” said Maggie, with a slight trembling of the lip. “I came home three or four days ago.”

“Isn’t my father well?” said Tom, rather anxiously.

“Not quite,” said Maggie. “He’s very unhappy, Tom. The lawsuit is ended, and I came to tell you, because I thought it would be better for you to know it before you came home, and I didn’t like only to send you a letter.”

“My father hasn’t lost?” said Tom, hastily, springing from the sofa, and standing before Maggie with his hands suddenly thrust in his pockets.

“Yes, dear Tom,” said Maggie, looking up at him with trembling.

Tom was silent a minute or two, with his eyes fixed on the floor. Then he said—

“My father will have to pay a good deal of money, then?”

“Yes,” said Maggie, rather faintly.

“Well, it can’t be helped,” said Tom, bravely, not translating the loss of a large sum of money into any tangible results. “But my father’s very much vexed, I daresay?” he added, looking at Maggie, and thinking that her agitated face was only part of her girlish way of taking things.

“Yes,” said Maggie, again faintly. Then, urged to fuller speech by Tom’s freedom from apprehension, she said loudly and rapidly, as if the words *would* burst from her, “O Tom, he will lose the mill and the land, and everything; he will have nothing left.”

Tom’s eyes flashed out one look of surprise at her, before he turned pale, and trembled visibly. He said nothing, but sat down on the sofa again, looking vaguely out of the opposite window.

Anxiety about the future had never entered Tom’s mind. His father had always ridden a good horse, kept a good house, and had the cheerful, confident air of a man who has plenty of property to fall back upon. Tom had never dreamed that his father would “fail;”

that was a form of misfortune which he had always heard spoken of as a deep disgrace, and disgrace was an idea that he could not associate with any of his relations, least of all with his father. A proud sense of family respectability was part of the very air Tom had been born and brought up in. He knew there were people in St. Ogg's who made a show without money to support it, and he had always heard such people spoken of by his own friends with contempt and reprobation. He had a strong belief, which was a life-long habit, and required no definite evidence to rest on, that his father could spend a great deal of money if he chose; and since his education at Mr. Stelling's had given him a more expensive view of life, he had often thought that when he got older he would make a figure in the world, with his horse and dogs and saddle, and other accoutrements of a fine young man, and show himself equal to any of his contemporaries at St. Ogg's, who might consider themselves a grade above him in society, because their fathers were professional men, or had large oil-mills. As to the prognostics and headshaking of his aunts and uncles, they had never produced the least effect on him, except to make him think that aunts and uncles were disagreeable society: he had heard them find fault in much the same way as long as he could remember. His father knew better than they did.

The down had come on Tom's lip, yet his thoughts and expectations had been hitherto only the reproduction, in changed forms, of the boyish dreams in which he had lived three years ago. He was awakened now with a violent shock.

Maggie was frightened at Tom's pale, trembling silence. There was something else to tell him—something worse. She threw her arms round him at last, and said, with a half sob—

"O Tom—dear, dear Tom, don't fret too much—try and bear it well."

Tom turned his cheek passively to meet her entreating kisses, and there gathered a moisture in his eyes, which he just rubbed away with his hand. The action seemed to rouse him, for he shook himself

and said, “I shall go home with you, Maggie. Didn’t my father say I was to go?”

“No, Tom, father didn’t wish it,” said Maggie, her anxiety about *his* feeling helping her to master her agitation. What *would* he do when she told him all? “But mother wants you to come—poor mother!—she cries so. O Tom, it’s very dreadful at home.”

Maggie’s lips grew whiter, and she began to tremble almost as Tom had done. The two poor things clung closer to each other—both trembling—the one at an unshapen fear, the other at the image of a terrible certainty. When Maggie spoke, it was hardly above a whisper.

“And … and … poor father….”

Maggie could not utter it. But the suspense was intolerable to Tom. A vague idea of going to prison, as a consequence of debt, was the shape his fears had begun to take.

“Where’s my father?” he said, impatiently. *“Tell* me, Maggie.”

“He’s at home,” said Maggie, finding it easier to reply to that question. “But,” she added, after a pause, “not himself,…He fell off his horse.… Hehas known nobody but me ever since.… He seems to have lost his senses … O, father, father….”

With these last words, Maggie’s sobs burst forth with the more violence for the previous struggle against them. Tom felt that pressure of the heart which forbids tears: he had no distinct vision of their troubles as Maggie had, who had been at home; he only felt the crushing weight of what seemed unmitigated misfortune. He tightened his arm almost convulsively round Maggie as she sobbed, but his face looked rigid and tearless—his eyes blank—as if a black curtain of cloud had suddenly fallen on his path.

But Maggie soon checked herself abruptly: a single thought had acted on her like a startling sound.

“We must set out, Tom—we must not stay—father will miss me—we must be at the turnpike at ten to meet the coach.” She said this

with hasty decision, rubbing her eyes, and rising to seize her bonnet.

Tom at once felt the same impulse, and rose too. “Wait a minute, Maggie,” he said. “I must speak to Mr. Stelling, and then we’ll go.”

He thought he must go to the study where the pupils were, but on his way he met Mr. Stelling, who had heard from his wife that Maggie appeared to be in trouble when she asked for her brother; and, now that he thought the brother and sister had been alone long enough, was coming to inquire and offer his sympathy.

“Please, sir, I must go home,” Tom said, abruptly, as he met Mr. Stelling in the passage. “I must go back with my sister directly. My father’s lost his lawsuit—he’s lost all his property—and he’s very ill.”

Mr. Stelling felt like a kind-hearted man; he foresaw a probable money loss for himself, but this had no appreciable share in his feeling, while he looked with grave pity at the brother and sister for whom youth and sorrow had begun together. When he knew how Maggie had come, and how eager she was to get home again, he hurried their departure, only whispering something to Mrs. Stelling, who had followed him, and who immediately left the room.

Tom and Maggie were standing on the door-step, ready to set out, when Mrs. Stelling came with a little basket, which she hung on Maggie’s arms, saying, “Do remember to eat something on the way, dear.” Maggie’s heart went out towards this woman whom she had never liked, and she kissed her silently. It was the first sign within the poor child of that new sense which is the gift of sorrow—that susceptibility to the bare offices of humanity which raises them into a bond of loving fellowship, as to haggard men among the icebergs the mere presence of an ordinary comrade stirs the deep fountains of affection.

Mr. Stelling put his hand on Tom’s shoulder and said, “God bless you, my boy: let me know how you get on.” Then he pressed Maggie’s hand; but there were no audible good-byes. Tom had so often thought how joyful he should be the day he left school “for

good!” And now his school years seemed like a holiday that had come to an end.

The two slight youthful figures soon grew indistinct on the distant road—were soon lost behind the projecting hedgerow.

They had gone forth together into their new life of sorrow, and they would never more see the sunshine undimmed by remembered cares. They had entered the thorny wilderness, and the golden gates of their childhood had for ever closed behind them.

BOOK THIRD

THE DOWNFALL

CHAPTER I

What Had Happened at Home

When Mr. Tulliver first knew the fact that the lawsuit was decided against him, and that Pivart and Wakem were triumphant, every one who happened to observe him at the time thought that, for so confident and hot-tempered a man, he bore the blow remarkably well. He thought so himself: he thought he was going to show that if Wakem or anybody else considered him crushed, they would find themselves mistaken. He could not refuse to see that the costs of this protracted suit would take more than he possessed to pay them; but he appeared to himself to be full of expedients by which he could ward off any results but such as were tolerable, and could avoid the appearance of breaking down in the world. All the obstinacy and defiance of his nature, driven out of their old channel, found a vent for themselves in the immediate formation of plans by which he would meet his difficulties, and remain Mr. Tulliver of Dorlcote Mill in spite of them. There was such a rush of projects in his brain, that it was no wonder his face was flushed when he came away from his talk with his attorney, Mr. Gore, and mounted his horse to ride home from Lindum. There was Furley, who held the mortgage on the land—a reasonable fellow, who would see his own interest, Mr. Tulliver was convinced, and who would be glad not only to purchase the whole estate, including the mill and homestead, but would accept Mr. Tulliver as tenant, and be willing to advance money to be repaid with high interest out of the profits of the business, which would be made over to him, Mr. Tulliver only taking enough barely to maintain himself and his family. Who would neglect such a profitable investment? Certainly not Furley, for Mr. Tulliver had determined that Furley should meet his plans with the utmost alacrity; and there are men whose brains have not yet been dangerously heated by the loss of a lawsuit, who are apt to see in their own interest or desires a motive for other men's actions.

There was no doubt (in the miller's mind) that Furley would do just what was desirable; and if he did—why, things would not be so very much worse. Mr. Tulliver and his family must live more meagrely and humbly, but it would only be till the profits of the business had paid off Furley's advances, and that might be while Mr. Tulliver had still a good many years of life before him. It was clear that the costs of the suit could be paid without his being obliged to turn out of his old place, and look like a ruined man. It was certainly an awkward moment in his affairs. There was that suretyship for poor Riley, who had died suddenly last April, and left his friend saddled with a debt of two hundred and fifty pounds—a fact which had helped to make Mr. Tulliver's banking book less pleasant reading than a man might desire towards Christmas. Well! he had never been one of those poor-spirited sneaks who would refuse to give a helping hand to a fellow-traveller in this puzzling world. The really vexatious business was the fact that some months ago the creditor who had lent him the five hundred pounds to repay Mrs. Glegg, had become uneasy about his money (set on by Wakem, of course), and Mr. Tulliver, still confident that he should gain his suit, and finding it eminently inconvenient to raise the said sum until that desirable issue had taken place, had rashly acceded to the demand that he should give a bill of sale on his household furniture, and some other effects, as security in lieu of the bond. It was all one, he had said to himself: he should soon pay off the money, and there was no harm in giving that security any more than another. But now the consequences of this bill of sale occurred to him in a new light, and he remembered that the time was close at hand, when it would be enforced unless the money were repaid. Two months ago he would have declared stoutly that he would never be beholden to his wife's friends; but now he told himself as stoutly that it was nothing but right and natural that Bessy should go to the Pullets and explain the thing to them: they would hardly let Bessy's furniture be sold, and it might be security to Pullet if he advanced the money—there would, after all, be no gift or favour in the matter. Mr. Tulliver would never have asked for anything from so poor-spirited a fellow for himself, but Bessy might do so if she liked.

It is precisely the proudest and most obstinate men who are the most liable to shift their position and contradict themselves in this sudden manner: everything is easier to them than to face the simple fact that they have been thoroughly defeated, and must begin life anew. And Mr. Tulliver, you perceive, though nothing more than a superior miller and maltster, was as proud and obstinate as if he had been a very lofty personage, in whom such dispositions might be a source of that conspicuous, far-echoing tragedy, which sweeps the stage in regal robes and makes the dullest chronicler sublime. The pride and obstinacy of millers, and other insignificant people, whom you pass unnoticingly on the road every day, have their tragedy too; but it is of that unwept, hidden sort, that goes on from generation to generation, and leaves no record—such tragedy, perhaps, as lies in the conflicts of young souls, hungry for joy, under a lot made suddenly hard to them, under the dreariness of a home where the morning brings no promise with it, and where the unexpectant discontent of worn and disappointed parents weighs on the children like a damp, thick air, in which all the functions of life are depressed; or such tragedy as lies in the slow or sudden death that follows on a bruised passion, though it may be a death that finds only a parish funeral. There are certain animals to which tenacity of position is a law of life—they can never flourish again, after a single wrench: and there are certain human beings to whom predominance is a law of life—they can only sustain humiliation so long as they can refuse to believe in it, and, in their own conception, predominate still.

Mr. Tulliver was still predominating in his own imagination as he approached St. Ogg's, through which he had to pass on his way homeward. But what was it that suggested to him, as he saw the Laceham coach entering the town, to follow it to the coach-office, and get the clerk there to write a letter, requiring Maggie to come home the very next day? Mr. Tulliver's own hand shook too much under his excitement for him to write himself, and he wanted the letter to be given to the coachman to deliver at Miss Firniss's school in the morning. There was a craving which he would not account

for to himself, to have Maggie near him—without delay—she must come back by the coach to-morrow.

To Mrs. Tulliver, when he got home, he would admit no difficulties, and scolded down her burst of grief on hearing that the lawsuit was lost, by angry assertions that there was nothing to grieve about. He said nothing to her that night about the bill of sale, and the application to Mrs. Pullet, for he had kept her in ignorance of the nature of that transaction, and had explained the necessity for taking an inventory of the goods as a matter connected with his will. The possession of a wife conspicuously one's inferior in intellect, is, like other high privileges, attended with a few inconveniences, and, among the rest, with the occasional necessity for using a little deception.

The next day Mr. Tulliver was again on horseback in the afternoon, on his way to Mr. Gore's office at St. Ogg's. Gore was to have seen Furley in the morning, and to have sounded him in relation to Mr. Tulliver's affairs. But he had not gone half-way when he met a clerk from Mr. Gore's office, who was bringing a letter to Mr. Tulliver. Mr. Gore had been prevented by a sudden call of business from waiting at his office to see Mr. Tulliver, according to appointment, but would be at his office at eleven to-morrow morning, and meanwhile had sent some important information by letter.

"O!" said Mr. Tulliver, taking the letter, but not opening it. "Then tell Gore I'll see him to-morrow at eleven;" and he turned his horse.

The clerk, struck with Mr. Tulliver's glistening excited glance, looked after him for a few moments, and then rode away. The reading of a letter was not the affair of an instant to Mr. Tulliver; he took in the sense of a statement very slowly through the medium of written or even printed characters; so he had put the letter in his pocket, thinking he would open it in his armchair at home. But by-and-by it occurred to him that there might be something in the letter Mrs. Tulliver must not know about, and if so, it would be better to keep it out of her sight altogether. He stopped his horse, took out the letter, and read it. It was only a short letter; the

substance was, that Mr. Gore had ascertained, on secret but sure authority, that Furley had been lately much straitened for money, and had parted with his securities—among the rest, the mortgage on Mr. Tulliver's property, which he had transferred to.... Wakem.

In half an hour after this, Mr. Tulliver's own waggoner found him lying by the roadside insensible, with an open letter near him, and his grey horse snuffing uneasily about him.

When Maggie reached home that evening, in obedience to her father's call, he was no longer insensible. About an hour before, he had become conscious, and after vague, vacant looks around him, had muttered something about "a letter," which he presently repeated impatiently. At the instance of Mr. Turnbull, the medical man, Gore's letter was brought and laid on the bed, and the previous impatience seemed to be allayed. The stricken man lay for some time with his eyes fixed on the letter, as if he were trying to knit up his thoughts by its help. But presently a new wave of memory seemed to have come and swept the other away; he turned his eyes from the letter to the door, and after looking uneasily, as if striving to see something his eyes were too dim for, he said, "The little wench."

He repeated the words impatiently from time to time, appearing entirely unconscious of everything except this one importunate want, and giving no sign of knowing his wife or any one else; and poor Mrs. Tulliver, her feeble faculties almost paralysed by this sudden accumulation of troubles, went backwards and forwards to the gate to see if the Laceham coach were coming, though it was not yet time.

But it came at last, and set down the poor anxious girl, no longer the "little wench," except to her father's fond memory.

"O mother, what is the matter?" Maggie said, with pale lips, as her mother came towards her crying. She didn't think her father was ill, because the letter had come at his dictation from the office at St. Ogg's.

But Mr. Turnbull came now to meet her: a medical man is the good angel of the troubled house, and Maggie ran towards the kind old friend, whom she remembered as long as she could remember anything, with a trembling, questioning look.

“Don’t alarm yourself too much, my dear,” he said, taking her hand. “Your father has had a sudden attack, and has not quite recovered his memory. But he has been asking for you, and it will do him good to see you. Keep as quiet as you can; take off your things, and come up-stairs with me.”

Maggie obeyed, with that terrible beating of the heart which makes existence seem simply a painful pulsation. The very quietness with which Mr. Turnbull spoke had frightened her susceptible imagination. Her father’s eyes were still turned uneasily towards the door when she entered and met the strange, yearning, helpless look that had been seeking her in vain. With a sudden flash and movement, he raised himself in the bed—she rushed towards him, and clasped him with agonised kisses.

Poor child! it was very early for her to know one of those supreme moments in life when all we have hoped or delighted in, all we can dread or endure, falls away from our regard as insignificant—is lost, like a trivial memory, in that simple, primitive love which knits us to the beings who have been nearest to us, in their times of helplessness or of anguish.

But that flash of recognition had been too great a strain on the father’s bruised, enfeebled powers. He sank back again in renewed insensibility and rigidity, which lasted for many hours, and was only broken by a flickering return of consciousness, in which he took passively everything that was given to him, and seemed to have a sort of infantine satisfaction in Maggie’s near presence—such satisfaction as a baby has when it is returned to the nurse’s lap.

Mrs. Tulliver sent for her sisters, and there was much wailing and lifting up of hands below stairs: both uncles and aunts saw that the ruin of Bessy and her family was as complete as they had ever foreboded it, and there was a general family sense that a judgment

had fallen on Mr. Tulliver, which it would be an impiety to counteract by too much kindness. But Maggie heard little of this, scarcely ever leaving her father's bedside, where she sat opposite him with her hand on his. Mrs. Tulliver wanted to have Tom fetched home, and seemed to be thinking more of her boy even than of her husband; but the aunts and uncles opposed this. Tom was better at school, since Mr. Turnbull said there was no immediate danger, he believed. But at the end of the second day, when Maggie had become more accustomed to her father's fits of insensibility, and to the expectation that he would revive from them, the thought of Tom had become urgent with *her* too; and when her mother sate crying at night and saying, "My poor lad … it's nothing but right he should come home;" Maggie said, "Let me go for him, and tell him, mother: I'll go to-morrow morning if father doesn't know me and want me. It would be so hard for Tom to come home and not know anything about it beforehand."

And the next morning Maggie went, as we have seen. Sitting on the coach on their way home, the brother and sister talked to each other in sad, interrupted whispers.

"They say Mr. Wakem has got a mortgage or something on the land, Tom," said Maggie. "It was the letter with that news in it that made father ill, they think."

"I believe that scoundrel's been planning all along to ruin my father," said Tom, leaping from the vaguest impressions to a definite conclusion. "I'll make him feel for it when I'm a man. Mind you never speak to Philip again."

"O, Tom!" said Maggie, in a tone of sad remonstrance; but she had no spirit to dispute anything then, still less to vex Tom by opposing him.

CHAPTER II

Mrs. Tulliver's Teraphim, or Household Gods

When the coach set down Tom and Maggie, it was five hours since she had started from home, and she was thinking with some trembling that her father had perhaps missed her, and asked for "the little wench" in vain. She thought of no other change that might have happened.

She hurried along the gravel-walk and entered the house before Tom; but in the entrance she was startled by a strong smell of tobacco. The parlour door was ajar—that was where the smell came from. It was very strange: could any visitor be smoking at a time like this? Was her mother there? If so, she must be told that Tom was come. Maggie, after this pause of surprise, was only in the act of opening the door when Tom came up, and they both looked into the parlour together. There was a coarse, dingy man, of whose face Tom had some vague recollection, sitting in his father's chair, smoking, with a jug and glass beside him.

The truth flashed on Tom's mind in an instant. To "have the bailiff in the house," and "to be sold up," were phrases which he had been used to, even as a little boy: they were part of the disgrace and misery of "failing," of losing all one's money, and being ruined —sinking into the condition of poor working people. It seemed only natural this should happen, since his father had lost all his property, and he thought of no more special cause for this particular form of misfortune than the loss of the lawsuit. But the immediate presence of this disgrace was so much keener an experience to Tom than the worst form of apprehension, that he felt at this moment as if his real trouble had only just begun: it was a touch on the irritated nerve compared with its spontaneous dull aching.

"How do you do, sir?" said the man, taking the pipe out of his mouth, with rough, embarrassed civility. The two young startled

faces made him a little uncomfortable.

But Tom turned away hastily without speaking: the sight was too hateful. Maggie had not understood the appearance of this stranger, as Tom had. She followed him, whispering, “Who can it be, Tom?—what is the matter?” Then, with a sudden undefined dread lest this stranger might have something to do with a change in her father, she rushed up-stairs, checking herself at the bedroom door to throw off her bonnet, and enter on tiptoe. All was silent there: her father was lying, heedless of everything around him, with his eyes closed as when she had left him. A servant was there, but not her mother.

“Where’s my mother?” she whispered. The servant did not know.

Maggie hastened out, and said to Tom, “Father is lying quiet: let us go and look for my mother. I wonder where she is.”

Mrs. Tulliver was not down-stairs—not in any of the bedrooms. There was but one room below the attic which Maggie had left unsearched: it was the store-room, where her mother kept all her linen and all the precious “best things” that were only unwrapped and brought out on special occasions. Tom, preceding Maggie as they returned along the passage, opened the door of this room, and immediately said, “Mother!”

Mrs. Tulliver was seated there with all her laid-up treasures. One of the linen-chests was open: the silver teapot was unwrapped from its many folds of paper, and the best china was laid out on the top of the closed linen-chest; spoons and skewers and ladles were spread in rows on the shelves; and the poor woman was shaking her head and weeping, with a bitter tension of the mouth, over the mark, “Elizabeth Dodson,” on the corner of some table-cloths she held in her lap.

She dropped them, and started up as Tom spoke.

“O my boy, my boy!” she said, clasping him round the neck. “To think as I should live to see this day! We’re ruined … everything’s going to be sold up … to think as your father should ha’ married me to bring me to this! We’ve got nothing … we shall be beggars … we must go to the workhouse.…”

She kissed him, then seated herself again, and took another table-cloth on her lap, unfolding it a little way to look at the pattern, while the children stood by in mute wretchedness—their minds quite filled for the moment with the words “beggars” and “workhouse.”

“To think o’ these clothes as I spun myself,” she went on, lifting things out and turning them over with an excitement all the more strange and piteous because the stout blond woman was usually so passive: if she had been ruffled before, it was at the surface merely: “and Job Haxey wove ’em, and brought the piece home on his back, as I remember standing at the door and seeing him come, before I ever thought o’ marrying your father! And the pattern as I chose myself—and bleached so beautiful, and I marked ’em so as nobody ever saw such marking—they must cut the cloth to get it out, for it’s a particular stitch. And they’re all to be sold—and go into strange people’s houses, and perhaps be cut with the knives, and wore out before I’m dead. You’ll never have one of ’em, my boy,” she said, looking up at Tom with her eyes full of tears, “and I meant ’em for you. I wanted you to have all o’ this pattern. Maggie could have had the large check—it never shows so well when the dishes are on it.”

Tom was touched to the quick, but there was an angry reaction immediately. His face flushed as he said—

“But will my aunts let them be sold, mother? Do they know about it? They’ll never let your linen go, will they? Haven’t you sent to them?”

“Yes, I sent Luke directly they’d put the bailies in, and your aunt Pullet’s been—and, O dear, O dear, she cries so, and says your father’s disgraced my family and made it the talk o’ the country; and she’ll buy the spotted cloths for herself, because she’s never had so many as she wanted o’ that pattern, and they shan’t go to strangers, but she’s got more checks a’ready nor she can do with.” (Here Mrs. Tulliver began to lay back the tablecloths in the chest, folding and stroking them automatically.) “And your uncle Glegg’s been too, and he says things must be bought in for us to lie down on, but he must talk to your aunt; and they’re all coming to consult.… But I know

they'll none of 'em take my chany," she added, turning towards the cups and saucers—"for they all found fault with 'em when I bought 'em, 'cause o' the small gold sprig all over 'em, between the flowers. But there's none of 'em got better chany, not even your aunt Pullet herself,—and I bought it wi' my own money as I'd saved ever since I was turned fifteen; and the silver teapot, too—your father never paid for 'em. And to think as he should ha' married me, and brought me to this."

Mrs. Tulliver burst out crying afresh, and she sobbed with her handkerchief at her eyes a few moments, but then removing it, she said in a deprecating way, still half-sobbing, as if she were called upon to speak before she could command her voice—

"And I *did* say to him times and times, 'Whativer you do, don't go to law'—and what more could I do? I've had to sit by while my own fortin's been spent, and what should ha' been my children's, too. You'll have niver a penny, my boy.... but it isn't your poor mother's fault."

She put out one arm towards Tom, looking up at him piteously with her helpless, childish blue eyes. The poor lad went to her and kissed her, and she clung to him. For the first time Tom thought of his father with some reproach. His natural inclination to blame, hitherto kept entirely in abeyance towards his father by the predisposition to think him always right, simply on the ground that he was Tom Tulliver's father—was turned into this new channel by his mother's plaints, and with his indignation against Wakem there began to mingle some indignation of another sort. Perhaps his father might have helped bringing them all down in the world, and making people talk of them with contempt; but no one should talk long of Tom Tulliver with contempt. The natural strength and firmness of his nature was beginning to assert itself, urged by the double stimulus of resentment against his aunts, and the sense that he must behave like a man and take care of his mother.

"Don't fret, mother," he said, tenderly. "I shall soon be able to get money: I'll get a situation of some sort."

“Bless you, my boy!” said Mrs. Tulliver, a little soothed. Then, looking round sadly, “But I shouldn’t ha’ minded so much if we could ha’ kept the things wi’ my name on ’em.”

Maggie had witnessed this scene with gathering anger. The implied reproaches against her father—her father, who was lying there in a sort of living death—neutralised all her pity for griefs about table-cloths and china; and her anger on her father’s account was heightened by some egoistic resentment at Tom’s silent concurrence with her mother in shutting her out from the common calamity. She had become almost indifferent to her mother’s habitual depreciation of her, but she was keenly alive to any sanction of it, however passive, that she might suspect in Tom. Poor Maggie was by no means made up of unalloyed devotedness, but put forth large claims for herself where she loved strongly. She burst out at last in an agitated, almost violent tone, “Mother, how can you talk so? as if you cared only for things with *your* name on, and not for what has my father’s name too—and to care about anything but dear father himself!—when he’s lying there, and may never speak to us again. Tom, you ought to say so too—you ought not to let any one find fault with my father.”

Maggie, almost choked with mingled grief and anger, left the room, and took her old place on her father’s bed. Her heart went out to him with a stronger movement than ever, at the thought that people would blame him. Maggie hated blame: she had been blamed all her life, and nothing had come of it but evil tempers. Her father had always defended and excused her, and her loving remembrance of his tenderness was a force within her that would enable her to do or bear anything for his sake.

Tom was a little shocked at Maggie’s outburst—telling *him* as well as his mother what it was right to do! She ought to have learned better than have those hectoring, assuming manners, by this time. But he presently went into his father’s room, and the sight there touched him in a way that effaced the slighter impressions of the previous hour. When Maggie saw how he was moved, she went to him and put her arm round his neck as he sat by the bed, and the

two children forgot everything else in the sense that they had one father and one sorrow.

CHAPTER III

The Family Council

It was at eleven o'clock the next morning that the aunts and uncles came to hold their consultation. The fire was lighted in the large parlour, and poor Mrs. Tulliver, with a confused impression that it was a great occasion, like a funeral, unbagged the bell-rope tassels, and unpinned the curtains, adjusting them in proper folds—looking round and shaking her head sadly at the polished tops and legs of the tables, which sister Pullet herself could not accuse of insufficient brightness.

Mr. Deane was not coming—he was away on business; but Mrs. Deane appeared punctually in that handsome new gig with the head to it, and the livery-servant driving it, which had thrown so clear a light on several traits in her character to some of her female friends in St. Ogg's. Mr. Deane had been advancing in the world as rapidly as Mr. Tulliver had been going down in it; and in Mrs. Deane's house the Dodson linen and plate were beginning to hold quite a subordinate position, as a mere supplement to the handsomer articles of the same kind, purchased in recent years: a change which had caused an occasional coolness in the sisterly intercourse between her and Mrs. Glegg, who felt that Susan was getting "like the rest," and there would soon be little of the true Dodson spirit surviving except in herself, and, it might be hoped, in those nephews who supported the Dodson name on the family land, far away in the Wolds. People who live at a distance are naturally less faulty than those immediately under our own eyes; and it seems superfluous, when we consider the remote geographical position of the Ethiopians, and how very little the Greeks had to do with them, to inquire further why Homer calls them "blameless."

Mrs. Deane was the first to arrive; and when she had taken her seat in the large parlour, Mrs. Tulliver came down to her with her

comely face a little distorted, nearly as it would have been if she had been crying: she was not a woman who could shed abundant tears, except in moments when the prospect of losing her furniture became unusually vivid, but she felt how unfitting it was to be quite calm under present circumstances.

“O sister, what a world this is!” she exclaimed as she entered; “what trouble, O dear!”

Mrs. Deane was a thin-lipped woman, who made small well-considered speeches on peculiar occasions, repeating them afterwards to her husband, and asking him if she had not spoken very properly.

“Yes, sister,” she said, deliberately, “this is a changing world, and we don’t know to-day what may happen to-morrow. But it’s right to be prepared for all things, and if trouble’s sent, to remember as it isn’t sent without a cause. I’m very sorry for you as a sister, and if the doctor orders jelly for Mr. Tulliver, I hope you’ll let me know: I’ll send it willingly. For it is but right he should have proper attendance while he’s ill.”

“Thank you, Susan,” said Mrs. Tulliver, rather faintly, withdrawing her fat hand from her sister’s thin one. “But there’s been no talk o’ jelly yet.” Then after a moment’s pause she added, “There’s a dozen o’ cut jelly-glasses up-stairs.… I shall niver put jelly into ’em no more.”

Her voice was rather agitated as she uttered the last words, but the sound of wheels diverted her thoughts. Mr. and Mrs. Glegg were come, and were almost immediately followed by Mr. and Mrs. Pullet.

Mrs. Pullet entered crying, as a compendious mode, at all times, of expressing what were her views of life in general, and what, in brief, were the opinions she held concerning the particular case before her.

Mrs. Glegg had on her fuzziest front, and garments which appeared to have had a recent resurrection from rather a creasy

form of burial; a costume selected with the high moral purpose of instilling perfect humility into Bessy and her children.

“Mrs. G., won’t you come nearer the fire?” said her husband, unwilling to take the more comfortable seat without offering it to her.

“You see I’ve seated myself here, Mr. Glegg,” returned this superior woman; *“you* can roast yourself, if you like.”

“Well,” said Mr. Glegg, seating himself good-humouredly, “and how’s the poor man up-stairs?”

“Dr. Turnbull thought him a deal better this morning,” said Mrs. Tulliver; “he took more notice, and spoke to me; but he’s never known Tom yet—looks at the poor lad as if he was a stranger, though he said something once about Tom and the pony. The doctor says his memory’s gone a long way back, and he doesn’t know Tom because he’s thinking of him when he was little. Eh dear, eh dear!”

“I doubt it’s the water got on his brain,” said aunt Pullet, turning round from adjusting her cap in a melancholy way at the pier-glass. “It’s much if he ever gets up again; and if he does, he’ll most like be childish, as Mr. Carr was, poor man! They fed him with a spoon as if he’d been a baby for three year. He’d quite lost the use of his limbs; but then he’d got a Bath chair, and somebody to draw him; and that’s what you won’t have, I doubt, Bessy.”

“Sister Pullet,” said Mrs. Glegg, severely, “if I understand right, we’ve come together this morning to advise and consult about what’s to be done in this disgrace as has fallen upon the family, and not to talk o’ people as don’t belong to us. Mr. Carr was none of our blood, nor noways connected with us, as I’ve ever heared.”

“Sister Glegg,” said Mrs. Pullet, in a pleading tone, drawing on her gloves again, and stroking the fingers in an agitated manner, “if you’ve got anything disrespectful to say o’ Mr. Carr, I do beg of you as you won’t say it to me. *I* know what he was,” she added, with a sigh; “his breath was short to that degree as you could hear him two rooms off.”

“Sophy!” said Mrs. Glegg, with indignant disgust, “you *do* talk o’ people’s complaints till it’s quite undecent. But I say again, as I said before, I didn’t come away from home to talk about acquaintance, whether they’d short breath or long. If we aren’t come together for one to hear what the other ’ull do to save a sister and her children from the parish, *I* shall go back. *One* can’t act without the other, I suppose; it isn’t to be expected as *I* should do everything.”

“Well, Jane,” said Mrs. Pullet, “I don’t see as you’ve been so very forrard at doing. So far as I know, this is the first time as here you’ve been, since it’s been known as the bailiff’s in the house; and I was here yesterday, and looked at all Bessy’s linen and things, and I told her I’d buy in the spotted table-cloths. I couldn’t speak fairer; for as for the teapot as she doesn’t want to go out o’ the family, it stands to sense I can’t do with two silver teapots, not if it *hadn’t* a straight spout—but the spotted damask I was allays fond on.”

“I wish it could be managed so as my teapot and chany and the best castors needn’t be put up for sale,” said poor Mrs. Tulliver, beseechingly, “and the sugar-tongs, the first things ever I bought.”

“But that can’t be helped, you know,” said Mr. Glegg. “If one o’ the family chooses to buy ’em in, they can, but one thing must be bid for as well as another.”

“And it isn’t to be looked for,” said uncle Pullet, with unwonted independence of idea, “as your own family should pay more for things nor they’ll fetch. They may go for an old song by auction.”

“O dear, O dear,” said Mrs. Tulliver, “to think o’ my chany being sold i’ that way—and I bought it when I was married, just as you did yours, Jane and Sophy: and I know you didn’t like mine, because o’ the sprig, but I was fond of it; and there’s never been a bit broke, for I’ve washed it myself—and there’s the tulips on the cups, and the roses, as anybody might go and look at ’em for pleasure. You wouldn’t like *your* chany to go for an old song and be broke to pieces, though yours has got no colour in it, Jane—it’s all white and flutted, and didn’t cost so much as mine. And there’s the

castors—sister Deane, I can't think but you'd like to have the castors, for I've heard you say they're pretty."

"Well, I've no objection to buy some of the best things," said Mrs. Deane, rather loftily; "we can do with extra things in our house."

"Best things!" exclaimed Mrs. Glegg with severity, which had gathered intensity from her long silence. "It drives me past patience to hear you all talking o' best things, and buying in this, that, and the other, such as silver and chany. You must bring your mind to your circumstances, Bessy, and not be thinking o' silver and chany; but whether you shall get so much as a flock bed to lie on, and a blanket to cover you, and a stool to sit on. You must remember, if you get 'em, it'll be because your friends have bought 'em for you, for you're dependent upon *them* for everything; for your husband lies there helpless, and hasn't got a penny i' the world to call his own. And it's for your own good I say this, for it's right you should feel what your state is, and what disgrace your husband's brought on your own family, as you've got to look to for everything—and be humble in your mind."

Mrs. Glegg paused, for speaking with much energy for the good of others is naturally exhausting. Mrs. Tulliver, always borne down by the family predominance of sister Jane, who had made her wear the yoke of a younger sister in very tender years, said pleadingly—

"I'm sure, sister, I've never asked anybody to do anything, only buy things as it 'ud be a pleasure to 'em to have, so as they mightn't go and be spoiled i' strange houses. I never asked anybody to buy the things in for me and my children; though there's the linen I spun, and I thought when Tom was born—I thought one o' the first things when he was lying i' the cradle, as all the things I'd brought wi' my own money, and been so careful of, 'ud go to him. But I've said nothing as I wanted my sisters to pay their money for me. What my husband has done for *his* sister's unknown, and we should ha' been better off this day if it hadn't been as he's lent money and never asked for it again."

“Come, come,” said Mr. Glegg, kindly, “don’t let us make things too dark. What’s done can’t be undone. We shall make a shift among us to buy what’s sufficient for you; though, as Mrs. G. says, they must be useful, plain things. We mustn’t be thinking o’ what’s unnecessary. A table, and a chair or two, and kitchen things, and a good bed, and suchlike. Why, I’ve seen the day when I shouldn’t ha’ known myself if I’d lain on sacking i’stead o’ the floor. We get a deal o’ useless things about us, only because we’ve got the money to spend.”

“Mr. Glegg,” said Mrs. G., “if you’ll be kind enough to let me speak, i’stead o’ taking the words out o’ my mouth—I was going to say, Bessy, as it’s fine talking for you to say as you’ve never asked us to buy anything for you; let me tell you, you *ought* to have asked us. Pray, how are you to be purvided for, if your own family don’t help you? You must go to the parish, if they didn’t. And you ought to know that, and keep it in mind, and ask us humble to do what we can for you, i’stead o’ saying, and making a boast, as you’ve never asked us for anything.”

“You talked o’ the Mosses, and what Mr. Tulliver’s done for ’em,” said uncle Pullet, who became unusually suggestive where advances of money were concerned. “Haven’t *they* been anear you? They ought to do something, as well as other folks; and if he’s lent ’em money, they ought to be made to pay it back.”

“Yes, to be sure,” said Mrs. Deane; “I’ve been thinking so. How is it Mr. and Mrs. Moss aren’t here to meet us? It is but right they should do their share.”

“O dear!” said Mrs. Tulliver, “I never sent ’em word about Mr. Tulliver, and they live so back’ard among the lanes at Basset, they niver hear anything only when Mr. Moss comes to market. But I niver gave ’em a thought. I wonder Maggie didn’t, though, for she was allays so fond of her aunt Moss.”

“Why don’t your children come in, Bessy?” said Mrs. Pullet, at the mention of Maggie. “They should hear what their aunts and uncles have got to say: and Maggie—when it’s me as have paid for half her

schooling, she ought to think more of her aunt Pullet than of aunt Mosses. I may go off sudden when I get home to-day—there's no telling."

"If I'd had *my* way," said Mrs. Glegg, "the children 'ud ha' been in the room from the first. It's time they knew who they've to look to, and it's right as *somebody* should talk to 'em, and let 'em know their condition i' life, and what they're come down to, and make 'em feel as they've got to suffer for their father's faults."

"Well, I'll go and fetch 'em, sister," said Mrs. Tulliver, resignedly. She was quite crushed now, and thought of the treasures in the store-room with no other feeling than blank despair.

She went up-stairs to fetch Tom and Maggie, who were both in their father's room, and was on her way down again, when the sight of the store-room door suggested a new thought to her. She went towards it, and left the children to go down by themselves.

The aunts and uncles appeared to have been in warm discussion when the brother and sister entered—both with shrinking reluctance; for though Tom, with a practical sagacity which had been roused into activity by the strong stimulus of the new emotions he had undergone since yesterday, had been turning over in his mind a plan which he meant to propose to one of his aunts or uncles, he felt by no means amicably towards them, and dreaded meeting them all at once as he would have dreaded a large dose of concentrated physic, which was but just endurable in small draughts. As for Maggie, she was peculiarly depressed this morning: she had been called up, after brief rest, at three o'clock, and had that strange dreamy weariness which comes from watching in a sick-room through the chill hours of early twilight and breaking day—in which the outside daylight life seems to have no importance, and to be a mere margin to the hours in the darkened chamber. Their entrance interrupted the conversation. The shaking of hands was a melancholy and silent ceremony, till uncle Pullet observed, as Tom approached him—

“Well, young sir, we’ve been talking as we should want your pen and ink; you can write rarely now, after all your schooling, I should think.”

“Ay, ay,” said uncle Glegg, with admonition which he meant to be kind, “we must look to see the good of all this schooling, as your father’s sunk so much money in, now—

> ‘When land is gone and money’s spent,
> Then learning is most excellent.’

Now’s the time, Tom, to let us see the good o’ your learning. Let us see whether you can do better than I can, as have made my fortin without it. But I began wi’ doing with little, you see: I could live on a basin o’ porridge and a crust o’ bread-and-cheese. But I doubt high living and high learning ’ull make it harder for you, young man, nor it was for me.”

“But he must do it,” interposed aunt Glegg, energetically, “whether it’s hard or no. He hasn’t got to consider what’s hard; he must consider as he isn’t to trusten to his friends to keep him in idleness and luxury: he’s got to bear the fruits of his father’s misconduct, and bring his mind to fare hard and to work hard. And he must be humble and grateful to his aunts and uncles for what they’re doing for his mother and father, as must be turned out into the streets and go to the workhouse if they didn’t help ’em. And his sister, too,” continued Mrs. Glegg, looking severely at Maggie, who had sat down on the sofa by her aunt Deane, drawn to her by the sense that she was Lucy’s mother, “she must make up her mind to be humble and work; for there’ll be no servants to wait on her any more—she must remember that. She must do the work o’ the house, and she must respect and love her aunts as have done so much for her, and saved their money to leave to their nepheys and nieces.”

Tom was still standing before the table in the centre of the group. There was a heightened colour in his face, and he was very far from looking humbled, but he was preparing to say, in a respectful tone, something he had previously meditated, when the door opened and his mother re-entered.

Poor Mrs. Tulliver had in her hands a small tray, on which she had placed her silver teapot, a specimen teacup and saucer, the castors, and sugar-tongs.

“See here, sister,” she said, looking at Mrs. Deane, as she set the tray on the table, “I thought, perhaps, if you looked at the teapot again—it’s a good while since you saw it—you might like the pattern better: it makes beautiful tea, and there’s a stand and everything: you might use it for every day, or else lay it by for Lucy when she goes to housekeeping. I should be so loth for ’em to buy it at the Golden Lion,” said the poor woman, her heart swelling, and the tears coming, “my teapot as I bought when I was married, and to think of its being scratched, and set before the travellers and folks, and my letters on it—see here, E. D.—and everybody to see ’em.”

“Ah, dear, dear!” said aunt Pullet, shaking her head with deep sadness, “it’s very bad—to think o’ the family initials going about everywhere—it niver was so before: you’re a very unlucky sister, Bessy. But what’s the use o’ buying the teapot, when there’s the linen and spoons and everything to go, and some of ’em with your full name—and when it’s got that straight spout, too.”

“As to disgrace o’ the family,” said Mrs. Glegg, “that can’t be helped wi’ buying teapots. The disgrace is, for one o’ the family to ha’ married a man as has brought her to beggary. The disgrace is, as they’re to be sold up. We can’t hinder the country from knowing that.”

Maggie had started up from the sofa at the allusion to her father, but Tom saw her action and flushed face in time to prevent her from speaking. “Be quiet, Maggie,” he said, authoritatively, pushing her aside. It was a remarkable manifestation of self-command and practical judgment in a lad of fifteen, that when his aunt Glegg ceased, he began to speak in a quiet and respectful manner, though with a good deal of trembling in his voice; for his mother’s words had cut him to the quick.

“Then, aunt,” he said, looking straight at Mrs. Glegg, “if you think it’s a disgrace to the family that we should be sold up, wouldn’t it be better to prevent it altogether? And if you and my aunt Pullet,” he continued, looking at the latter, “think of leaving any money to me and Maggie, wouldn’t it be better to give it now, and pay the debt we’re going to be sold up for, and save my mother from parting with her furniture?”

There was silence for a few moments, for every one, including Maggie, was astonished at Tom’s sudden manliness of tone. Uncle Glegg was the first to speak.

“Ay, ay, young man—come now! You show some notion o’ things. But there’s the interest, you must remember; your aunts get five per cent on their money, and they’d lose that if they advanced it—you haven’t thought o’ that.”

“I could work and pay that every year,” said Tom, promptly. “I’d do anything to save my mother from parting with her things.”

“Well done!” said uncle Glegg, admiringly. He had been drawing Tom out, rather than reflecting on the practicability of his proposal. But he had produced the unfortunate result of irritating his wife.

“Yes, Mr. Glegg!” said that lady, with angry sarcasm. “It’s pleasant work for you to be giving my money away, as you’ve pretended to leave at my own disposial. And my money, as was my own father’s gift, and not yours, Mr. Glegg; and I’ve saved it, and added to it myself, and had more to put out almost every year, and it’s to go and be sunk in other folks’ furniture, and encourage ’em in luxury and extravagance as they’ve no means of supporting; and I’m to alter my will, or have a codicil made, and leave two or three hundred less behind me when I die—me as have allays done right and been careful, and the eldest o’ the family; and my money’s to go and be squandered on them as have had the same chance as me, only they’ve been wicked and wasteful. Sister Pullet, *you* may do as you like, and you may let your husband rob you back again o’ the money he’s given you, but that isn’t *my* sperrit.”

“La, Jane, how fiery you are!” said Mrs. Pullet. “I’m sure you’ll have the blood in your head, and have to be cupped. I’m sorry for Bessy and her children—I’m sure I think of ’em o’ nights dreadful, for I sleep very bad wi’ this new medicine: but it’s no use for me to think o’ doing anything, if you won’t meet me half-way.”

“Why, there’s this to be considered,” said Mr. Glegg. “It’s no use to pay off this debt and save the furniture, when there’s all the law debts behind, as ’ud take every shilling, and more than could be made out o’ land and stock, for I’ve made that out from Lawyer Gore. We’d need save our money to keep the poor man with, instead o’ spending it on furniture as he can neither eat nor drink. You *will* be so hasty, Jane, as if I didn’t know what was reasonable.”

“Then speak accordingly, Mr. Glegg!” said his wife, with slow, loud emphasis, bending her head towards him significantly.

Tom’s countenance had fallen during this conversation, and his lip quivered; but he was determined not to give way. He would behave like a man. Maggie, on the contrary, after her momentary delight in Tom’s speech, had relapsed into her state of trembling indignation. Her mother had been standing close by Tom’s side, and had been clinging to his arm ever since he had last spoken: Maggie suddenly started up and stood in front of them, her eyes flashing like the eyes of a young lioness.

“Why do you come, then,” she burst out, “talking and interfering with us and scolding us, if you don’t mean to do anything to help my poor mother—your own sister—if you’ve no feeling for her when she’s in trouble, and won’t part with anything, though you would never miss it, to save her from pain? Keep away from us then, and don’t come to find fault with my father—he was better than any of you—he was kind—he would have helped *you*, if you had been in trouble. Tom and I don’t ever want to have any of your money, if you won’t help my mother. We’d rather not have it! we’ll do without you.”

Maggie, having hurled her defiance at aunts and uncles in this way, stood still, with her large dark eyes glaring at them, as if she

were ready to await all consequences.

Mrs. Tulliver was frightened; there was something portentous in this mad outbreak; she did not see how life could go on after it. Tom was vexed; it was no *use* to talk so. The aunts were silent with surprise for some moments. At length, in a case of aberration such as this, comment presented itself as more expedient than any answer.

"You haven't seen the end o' your trouble wi' that child, Bessy," said Mrs. Pullet; "she's beyond everything for boldness and unthankfulness. It's dreadful. I might ha' let alone paying for her schooling, for she's worse nor ever."

"It's no more than what I've allays said," followed Mrs. Glegg. "Other folks may be surprised, but I'm not. I've said over and over again—years ago I've said—'Mark my words; that child 'ull come to no good: there isn't a bit of our family in her.' And as for her having so much schooling, I never thought well o' that. I'd my reasons when I said *I* wouldn't pay anything towards it."

"Come, come," said Mr. Glegg, "let's waste no more time in talking—let's go to business. Tom now, get the pen and ink—"

While Mr. Glegg was speaking, a tall dark figure was seen hurrying past the window.

"Why, there's Mrs. Moss," said Mrs. Tulliver. "The bad news must ha' reached her, then;" and she went out to open the door, Maggie eagerly following her.

"That's fortunate," said Mrs. Glegg. "She can agree to the list o' things to be bought in. It's but right she should do her share when it's her own brother."

Mrs. Moss was in too much agitation to resist Mrs. Tulliver's movement, as she drew her into the parlour, automatically, without reflecting that it was hardly kind to take her among so many persons in the first painful moment of arrival. The tall, worn, dark-haired woman was a strong contrast to the Dodson sisters as she entered in her shabby dress, with her shawl and bonnet looking as if they had been hastily huddled on, and with that entire absence of

self-consciousness which belongs to keenly-felt trouble. Maggie was clinging to her arm; and Mrs. Moss seemed to notice no one else except Tom, whom she went straight up to and took by the hand.

“O my dear children,” she burst out, “you’ve no call to think well o’ me; I’m a poor aunt to you, for I’m one o’ them as take all and give nothing. How’s my poor brother?”

“Mr. Turnbull thinks he’ll get better,” said Maggie. “Sit down, aunt Gritty. Don’t fret.”

“O my sweet child, I feel torn i’ two,” said Mrs. Moss, allowing Maggie to lead her to the sofa, but still not seeming to notice the presence of the rest. “We’ve three hundred pounds o’ my brother’s money, and now he wants it, and you all want it, poor things!—and yet we must be sold up to pay it, and there’s my poor children—eight of ’em, and the little un of all can’t speak plain. And I feel as if I was a robber. But I’m sure I’d no thought as my brother….”

The poor woman was interrupted by a rising sob.

“Three hundred pounds! O dear, dear,” said Mrs. Tulliver, who, when she had said that her husband had done “unknown” things for his sister, had not had any particular sum in her mind, and felt a wife’s irritation at having been kept in the dark.

“What madness, to be sure!” said Mrs. Glegg. “A man with a family! He’d no right to lend his money i’ that way; and without security, I’ll be bound, if the truth was known.”

Mrs. Glegg’s voice had arrested Mrs. Moss’s attention, and, looking up, she said—

“Yes, there *was* security: my husband gave a note for it. We’re not that sort o’ people, neither of us, as ’ud rob my brother’s children; and we looked to paying back the money, when the times got a bit better.”

“Well, but now,” said Mr. Glegg, gently, “hasn’t your husband no way o’ raising this money? Because it ’ud be a little fortin, like, for these folks, if we can do without Tulliver’s being made a bankrupt.

Your husband's got stock: it is but right he should raise the money, as it seems to me—not but what I'm sorry for you, Mrs. Moss."

"O sir, you don't know what bad luck my husband's had with his stock. The farm's suffering so as never was for want o' stock; and we've sold all the wheat, and we're behind with our rent … not but what we'd like to do what's right, and I'd sit up and work half the night, if it 'ud be any good … but there's them poor children … four of 'em such little uns

"Don't cry so, aunt—don't fret," whispered Maggie, who had kept hold of Mrs. Moss's hand.

"Did Mr. Tulliver let you have the money all at once?" said Mrs. Tulliver, still lost in the conception of things which had been "going on" without her knowledge.

"No; at twice," said Mrs. Moss, rubbing her eyes and making an effort to restrain her tears. "The last was after my bad illness, four years ago, as everything went wrong, and there was a new note made then. What with illness and bad luck, I've been nothing but cumber all my life."

"Yes, Mrs. Moss," said Mrs. Glegg, with decision. "Yours is a very unlucky family; the more's the pity for *my* sister."

"I set off in the cart as soon as ever I heard o' what had happened," said Mrs. Moss, looking at Mrs. Tulliver. "I should never ha' stayed away all this while, if you'd thought well to let me know. And it isn't as I'm thinking all about ourselves, and nothing about my brother—only the money was so on my mind, I couldn't help speaking about it. And my husband and me desire to do the right thing, sir," she added, looking at Mr. Glegg, "and we'll make shift and pay the money, come what will, if that's all my brother's got to trust to. We've been used to trouble, and don't look for much else. It's only the thought o' my poor children pulls me i' two."

"Why, there's this to be thought on, Mrs. Moss," said Mr. Glegg, "and it's right to warn you;—if Tulliver's made a bankrupt, and he's got a note-of-hand of your husband's for three hundred pounds, you'll be obliged to pay it: th' assignees 'ull come on you for it."

“O dear, O dear!” said Mrs. Tulliver, thinking of the bankruptcy, and not of Mrs. Moss’s concern in it. Poor Mrs. Moss herself listened in trembling submission, while Maggie looked with bewildered distress at Tom to see if *he* showed any signs of understanding this trouble, and caring about poor aunt Moss. Tom was only looking thoughtful, with his eyes on the table-cloth.

“And if he isn’t made bankrupt,” continued Mr. Glegg, “as I said before, three hundred pounds ’ud be a little fortin for him, poor man. We don’t know but what he may be partly helpless, if he ever gets up again. I’m very sorry if it goes hard with you, Mrs. Moss—but my opinion is, looking at it one way, it’ll be right for you to raise the money; and looking at it th’ other way, you’ll be obliged to pay it. You won’t think ill o’ me for speaking the truth.”

“Uncle,” said Tom, looking up suddenly from his meditative view of the table-cloth, “I don’t think it would be right for my aunt Moss to pay the money, if it would be against my father’s will for her to pay it; would it?”

Mr. Glegg looked surprised for a moment or two before he said, “Why, no, perhaps not, Tom; but then he’d ha’ destroyed the note, you know. We must look for the note. What makes you think it ’ud be against his will?”

“Why,” said Tom, colouring, but trying to speak firmly, in spite of a boyish tremor, “I remember quite well, before I went to school to Mr. Stelling, my father said to me one night, when we were sitting by the fire together, and no one else was in the room.…”

Tom hesitated a little, and then went on.

“He said something to me about Maggie, and then he said, ‘I’ve always been good to my sister, though she married against my will—and I’ve lent Moss money; but I shall never think of distressing him to pay it: I’d rather lose it. My children must not mind being the poorer for that.’ And now my father’s ill, and not able to speak for himself, I shouldn’t like anything to be done contrary to what he said to me.”

“Well, but then, my boy,” said uncle Glegg, whose good feeling led him to enter into Tom’s wish, but who could not at once shake off his habitual abhorrence of such recklessness as destroying securities, or alienating anything important enough to make an appreciable difference in a man’s property, “we should have to make away wi’ the note, you know, if we’re to guard against what may happen, supposing your father’s made bankrupt.…”

“Mr. Glegg,” interrupted his wife, severely, “mind what you’re saying. You’re putting yourself very forrard in other folk’s business. If you speak rash, don’t say it was my fault.”

“That’s such a thing as I never heared of before,” said uncle Pullet, who had been making haste with his lozenge in order to express his amazement; “making away with a note! I should think anybody could set the constable on you for it.”

“Well, but,” said Mrs. Tulliver, “if the note’s worth all that money, why can’t we pay it away, and save my things from going away? We’ve no call to meddle with your uncle and aunt Moss, Tom, if you think your father ’ud be angry when he gets well.”

Mrs. Tulliver had not studied the question of exchange, and was straining her mind after original ideas on the subject.

“Pooh, pooh, pooh! you women don’t understand these things,” said uncle Glegg. “There’s no way o’ making it safe for Mr. and Mrs. Moss but destroying the note.”

“Then I hope you’ll help me to do it, uncle,” said Tom, earnestly. “If my father shouldn’t get well, I should be very unhappy to think anything had been done against his will, that I could hinder. And I’m sure he meant me to remember what he said that evening. I ought to obey my father’s wish about his property.”

Even Mrs. Glegg could not withhold her approval from Tom’s words: she felt that the Dodson blood was certainly speaking in him, though, if his father had been a Dodson, there would never have been this wicked alienation of money. Maggie would hardly have restrained herself from leaping on Tom’s neck, if her aunt Moss had

not prevented her by herself rising and taking Tom's hand, while she said, with rather a choked voice—

"You'll never be the poorer for this, my dear boy, if there's a God above; and if the money's wanted for your father, Moss and me 'ull pay it, the same as if there was ever such security. We'll do as we'd be done by; for if my children have got no other luck, they've got an honest father and mother."

"Well," said Mr. Glegg, who had been meditating after Tom's words, "we shouldn't be doing any wrong by the creditors, supposing your father *was* bankrupt. I've been thinking o' that, for I've been a creditor myself, and seen no end o' cheating. If he meant to give your aunt the money before ever he got into this sad work o' lawing, it's the same as if he'd made away with the note himself; for he'd made up his mind to be that much poorer. But there's a deal o' things to be considered, young man," Mr. Glegg added, looking admonishingly at Tom, "when you come to money business, and you may be taking one man's dinner away to make another man's breakfast. You don't understand that, I doubt?"

"Yes, I do," said Tom, decidedly. "I know if I owe money to one man, I've no right to give it to another. But if my father had made up his mind to give my aunt the money before he was in debt, he had a right to do it."

"Well done, young man! I didn't think you'd been so sharp," said uncle Glegg, with much candour. "But perhaps your father *did* make away with the note. Let us go and see if we can find it in the chest."

"It's in my father's room. Let us go too, aunt Gritty," whispered Maggie.

CHAPTER IV

A Vanishing Gleam

Mr. Tulliver, even between the fits of spasmodic rigidity which had recurred at intervals ever since he had been found fallen from his horse, was usually in so apathetic a condition that the exits and entrances into his room were not felt to be of great importance. He had lain so still, with his eyes closed, all this morning, that Maggie told her aunt Moss she must not expect her father to take any notice of them.

They entered very quietly, and Mrs. Moss took her seat near the head of the bed, while Maggie sat in her old place on the bed, and put her hand on her father's, without causing any change in his face.

Mr. Glegg and Tom had also entered, treading softly, and were busy selecting the key of the old oak chest from the bunch which Tom had brought from his father's bureau. They succeeded in opening the chest—which stood opposite the foot of Mr. Tulliver's bed—and propping the lid with the iron holder, without much noise.

"There's a tin box," whispered Mr. Glegg; "he'd most like put a small thing like a note in there. Lift it out, Tom; but I'll just lift up these deeds—they're the deeds o' the house and mill, I suppose—and see what there is under 'em."

Mr. Glegg had lifted out the parchments, and had fortunately drawn back a little when the iron holder gave way, and the heavy lid fell with a loud bang, that resounded over the house.

Perhaps there was something in that sound more than the mere fact of the strong vibration that produced the instantaneous effects on the frame of the prostrate man, and for the time completely shook off the obstruction of paralysis. The chest had belonged to his father and his father's father, and it had always been rather a

solemn business to visit it. All long-known objects, even a mere window fastening or a particular door-latch, have sounds which are a sort of recognised voice to us—a voice that will thrill and awaken, when it has been used to touch deep-lying fibres. In the same moment when all the eyes in the room were turned upon him, he started up and looked at the chest, the parchments in Mr. Glegg's hand, and Tom holding the tin box, with a glance of perfect consciousness and recognition.

"What are you going to do with those deeds?" he said, in his ordinary tone of sharp questioning whenever he was irritated. "Come here, Tom. What do you do, going to my chest?"

Tom obeyed, with some trembling: it was the first time his father had recognised him. But instead of saying anything more to him, his father continued to look with a growing distinctness of suspicion at Mr. Glegg and the deeds.

"What's been happening, then?" he said, sharply. "What are you meddling with my deeds for? Is Wakem laying hold of everything?… Why don't you tell me what you've been a-doing?" he added, impatiently, as Mr. Glegg advanced to the foot of the bed before speaking.

"No, no, friend Tulliver," said Mr. Glegg, in a soothing tone. "Nobody's getting hold of anything as yet. We only came to look and see what was in the chest. You've been ill, you know, and we've had to look after things a bit. But let's hope you'll soon be well enough to attend to everything yourself."

Mr. Tulliver looked round him meditatively—at Tom, at Mr. Glegg, and at Maggie; then suddenly appearing aware that some one was seated by his side at the head of the bed, he turned sharply round and saw his sister.

"Eh, Gritty!" he said, in the half-sad, affectionate tone in which he had been wont to speak to her. "What! you're there, are you? How could you manage to leave the children?"

"O, brother!" said good Mrs. Moss, too impulsive to be prudent, "I'm thankful I'm come now to see you yourself again—I thought

you'd never know us any more."

"What! have I had a stroke?" said Mr. Tulliver, anxiously, looking at Mr. Glegg.

"A fall from your horse—shook you a bit—that's all, I think," said Mr. Glegg. "But you'll soon get over it, let's hope."

Mr. Tulliver fixed his eyes on the bed-clothes, and remained silent for two or three minutes. A new shadow came over his face. He looked up at Maggie first, and said in a lower tone, "You got the letter, then, my wench?"

"Yes, father," she said, kissing him with a full heart. She felt as if her father were come back to her from the dead, and her yearning to show him how she had always loved him could be fulfilled.

"Where's your mother?" he said, so preoccupied that he received the kiss as passively as some quiet animal might have received it.

"She's down-stairs with my aunts, father: shall I fetch her?"

"Ay, ay: poor Bessy!" and his eyes turned towards Tom as Maggie left the room.

"You'll have to take care of 'em both if I die, you know, Tom. You'll be badly off, I doubt. But you must see and pay everybody. And mind—there's fifty pound o' Luke's as I put into the business—he gave it me a bit at a time, and he's got nothing to show for it. You must pay him first thing."

Uncle Glegg involuntarily shook his head, and looked more concerned than ever, but Tom said firmly—

"Yes, father. And haven't you a note from my uncle Moss for three hundred pounds? We came to look for that. What do you wish to be done about it, father?"

"Ah! I'm glad you thought o' that my lad," said Mr. Tulliver. "I allays meant to be easy about that money, because o' your aunt. You mustn't mind losing the money, if they can't pay it—and it's like enough they can't. The note's in that box, mind! I allays meant to be good to you, Gritty," said Mr. Tulliver, turning to his sister; "but, you know, you aggravated me when you would have Moss."

At this moment Maggie re-entered with her mother, who came in much agitated by the news that her husband was quite himself again.

“Well, Bessy,” he said, as she kissed him, “you must forgive me if you’re worse off than you ever expected to be. But it’s the fault o’ the law—it’s none o’ mine,” he added, angrily. “It’s the fault o’ raskills! Tom—you mind this: if ever you’ve got the chance, you make Wakem smart. If you don’t, you’re a good-for-nothing son. You might horse-whip him—but he’d set the law on you—the law’s made to take care o’ raskills.”

Mr. Tulliver was getting excited, and an alarming flush was on his face. Mr. Glegg wanted to say something soothing, but he was prevented by Mr. Tulliver’s speaking again to his wife. “They’ll make a shift to pay everything, Bessy,” he said, “and yet leave you your furniture; and your sisters ’ll do something for you … and Tom grow up … though what he’s to be I don’t know….I’ve done what I could….I’ve given him a eddication … and there’s the little wench, she’ll get married … but it’s a poor tale….”

The sanative effect of the strong vibration was exhausted, and with the last words the poor man fell again, rigid and insensible. Though this was only a recurrence of what had happened before, it struck all present as if it had been death, not only from its contrast with the completeness of the revival, but because his words had all had reference to the possibility that his death was near. But with poor Tulliver death was not to be a leap: it was to be a long descent under thickening shadows.

Mr. Turnbull was sent for; but when he heard what had passed, he said this complete restoration, though only temporary, was a hopeful sign, proving that there was no permanent lesion to prevent ultimate recovery.

Among the threads of the past which the stricken man had gathered up, he had omitted the bill of sale; the flash of memory had only lit up prominent ideas, and he sank into forgetfulness again with half his humiliation unlearned.

But Tom was clear upon two points—that his uncle Moss's note must be destroyed, and that Luke's money must be paid, if in no other way, out of his own and Maggie's money now in the savings bank. There were subjects, you perceive, on which Tom was much quicker than on the niceties of classical construction, or the relations of a mathematical demonstration.

CHAPTER V

Tom Applies his Knife to the Oyster

The next day, at ten o'clock, Tom was on his way to St. Ogg's, to see his uncle Deane, who was to come home last night, his aunt had said; and Tom had made up his mind that his uncle Deane was the right person to ask for advice about getting some employment. He was in a great way of business; he had not the narrow notions of uncle Glegg; and he had risen in the world on a scale of advancement which accorded with Tom's ambition.

It was a dark, chill, misty morning, likely to end in rain—one of those mornings when even happy people take refuge in their hopes. And Tom was very unhappy: he felt the humiliation as well as the prospective hardships of his lot with all the keenness of a proud nature; and with all his resolute dutifulness towards his father there mingled an irrepressible indignation against him which gave misfortune the less endurable aspect of a wrong. Since these were the consequences of going to law, his father was really blamable, as his aunts and uncles had always said he was; and it was a significant indication of Tom's character, that though he thought his aunts ought to do something more for his mother, he felt nothing like Maggie's violent resentment against them for showing no eager tenderness and generosity. There were no impulses in Tom that led him to expect what did not present itself to him as a right to be demanded. Why should people give away their money plentifully to those who had not taken care of their own money? Tom saw some justice in severity; and all the more, because he had confidence in himself that he should never deserve that just severity. It was very hard upon him that he should be put at this disadvantage in life by his father's want of prudence; but he was not going to complain and to find fault with people because they did not make everything easy for him. He would ask no one to help him, more than to give him

work and pay him for it. Poor Tom was not without his hopes to take refuge in under the chill damp imprisonment of the December fog which seemed only like a part of his home troubles. At sixteen, the mind that has the strongest affinity for fact cannot escape illusion and self-flattery; and Tom, in sketching his future, had no other guide in arranging his facts than the suggestions of his own brave self-reliance. Both Mr. Glegg and Mr. Deane, he knew, had been very poor once: he did not want to save money slowly and retire on a moderate fortune like his uncle Glegg, but he would be like his uncle Deane—get a situation in some great house of business and rise fast. He had scarcely seen anything of his uncle Deane for the last three years—the two families had been getting wider apart; but for this very reason Tom was the more hopeful about applying to him. His uncle Glegg, he felt sure, would never encourage any spirited project, but he had a vague imposing idea of the resources at his uncle Deane's command. He had heard his father say, long ago, how Deane had made himself so valuable to Guest & Co. that they were glad enough to offer him a share in the business: that was what Tom resolved *he* would do. It was intolerable to think of being poor and looked down upon all one's life. He would provide for his mother and sister, and make every one say that he was a man of high character. He leaped over the years in this way, and in the haste of strong purpose and strong desire, did not see how they would be made up of slow days, hours, and minutes.

By the time he had crossed the stone bridge over the Floss and was entering St. Ogg's, he was thinking that he would buy his father's mill and land again when he was rich enough, and improve the house and live there: he should prefer it to any smarter, newer place, and he could keep as many horses and dogs as he liked.

Walking along the street with a firm, rapid step, at this point in his reverie he was startled by some one who had crossed without his notice, and who said to him in a rough, familiar voice—

"Why, Master Tom, how's your father this morning?" It was a publican of St. Ogg's—one of his father's customers.

Tom disliked being spoken to just then; but he said civilly, “He’s still very ill, thank you.”

“Ay, it’s been a sore chance for you, young man, hasn’t it?—this lawsuit turning out against him,” said the publican, with a confused beery idea of being good-natured.

Tom reddened and passed on: he would have felt it like the handling of a bruise, even if there had been the most polite and delicate reference to his position.

“That’s Tulliver’s son,” said the publican to a grocer standing on the adjacent door-step.

“Ah!” said the grocer, “I thought I knew his features. He takes after his mother’s family: she was a Dodson. He’s a fine, straight youth: what’s he been brought up to?”

“Oh! to turn up his nose at his father’s customers, and be a fine gentleman—not much else, I think.”

Tom, roused from his dream of the future to a thorough consciousness of the present, made all the greater haste to reach the warehouse offices of Guest & Co., where he expected to find his uncle Deane. But this was Mr. Deane’s morning at the bank, a clerk told him, with some contempt for his ignorance: Mr. Deane was not to be found in River Street on a Thursday morning.

At the bank Tom was admitted into the private room where his uncle was, immediately after sending in his name. Mr. Deane was auditing accounts; but he looked up as Tom entered, and, putting out his hand, said, “Well, Tom, nothing fresh the matter at home, I hope? How’s your father?”

“Much the same, thank you, uncle,” said Tom, feeling nervous. “But I want to speak to you, please, when you’re at liberty.”

“Sit down, sit down,” said Mr. Deane, relapsing into his accounts, in which he and the managing-clerk remained so absorbed for the next half-hour that Tom began to wonder whether he should have to sit in this way till the bank closed—there seemed so little tendency towards a conclusion in the quiet monotonous procedure of these

sleek, prosperous men of business. Would his uncle give him a place in the bank? it would be very dull, prosy work, he thought, writing there for ever to the loud ticking of a time-piece. He preferred some other way of getting rich. But at last there was a change: his uncle took a pen and wrote something with a flourish at the end.

“You’ll just step up to Torry’s now, Mr. Spence, will you?” said Mr. Deane, and the clock suddenly became less loud and deliberate in Tom’s ears.

“Well, Tom,” said Mr. Deane, when they were alone, turning his substantial person a little in his chair, and taking out his snuff-box, “what’s the business, my boy—what’s the business?” Mr. Deane, who had heard from his wife what had passed the day before, thought Tom was come to appeal to him for some means of averting the sale.

“I hope you’ll excuse me for troubling you, uncle,” said Tom, colouring, but speaking in a tone which, though tremulous, had a certain proud independence in it; “but I thought you were the best person to advise me what to do.”

“Ah!” said Mr. Deane, reserving his pinch of snuff, and looking at Tom with new attention, “let us hear.”

“I want to get a situation, uncle, so that I may earn some money,” said Tom, who never fell into circumlocution.

“A situation?” said Mr. Deane, and then took his pinch of snuff with elaborate justice to each nostril. Tom thought snuff-taking a most provoking habit.

“Why, let me see, how old are you?” said Mr. Deane, as he threw himself backward again.

“Sixteen—I mean, I am going in seventeen,” said Tom, hoping his uncle noticed how much beard he had.

“Let me see—your father had some notion of making you an engineer, I think?”

“But I don’t think I could get any money at that for a long while, could I?”

“That’s true; but people don’t get much money at anything, my boy, when they’re only sixteen. You’ve had a good deal of schooling, however: I suppose you’re pretty well up in accounts, eh? You understand book-keeping?”

“No,” said Tom, rather falteringly. “I was in Practice. But Mr. Stelling says I write a good hand, uncle. That’s my writing,” added Tom, laying on the table a copy of the list he had made yesterday.

“Ah! that’s good, that’s good. But, you see, the best hand in the world ’ll not get you a better place than a copying-clerk’s, if you know nothing of book-keeping—nothing of accounts. And a copying-clerk’s a cheap article. But what have you been learning at school, then?”

Mr. Deane had not occupied himself with methods of education, and had no precise conception of what went forward in expensive schools.

“We learned Latin,” said Tom, pausing a little between each item, as if he were turning over the books in his school-desk to assist his memory—“a good deal of Latin; and the last year I did Themes, one week in Latin and one in English; and Greek and Roman History; and Euclid; and I began Algebra, but I left it off again; and we had one day every week for Arithmetic. Then I used to have drawing-lessons; and there were several other books we either read or learned out of, English Poetry, and Horœ Paulinæ, and Blair’s Rhetoric, the last half.”

Mr. Deane tapped his snuff-box again, and screwed up his mouth: he felt in the position of many estimable persons when they had read the New Tariff, and found how many commodities were imported of which they knew nothing: like a cautious man of business, he was not going to speak rashly of a raw material in which he had had no experience. But the presumption was, that if it had been good for anything, so successful a man as himself would hardly have been ignorant of it. About Latin he had an opinion, and thought that in case of another war, since people would no longer wear hair-powder, it would be well to put a tax upon Latin, as a

luxury much run upon by the higher classes, and not telling at all on the ship-owning department. But, for what he knew, the Horæ Paulinæ might be something less neutral. On the whole, this list of acquirements gave him a sort of repulsion towards poor Tom.

"Well," he said, at last, in rather a cold, sardonic tone, "you've had three years at these things—you must be pretty strong in 'em. Hadn't you better take up some line where they'll come in handy?"

Tom coloured, and burst out, with new energy—

"I'd rather not have any employment of that sort, uncle. I don't like Latin and those things. I don't know what I could do with them unless I went as usher in a school; and I don't know them well enough for that: besides, I would as soon carry a pair of panniers. I don't want to be that sort of person. I should like to enter into some business where I can get on—a manly business, where I should have to look after things, and get credit for what I did. And I shall want to keep my mother and sister."

"Ah, young gentleman," said Mr. Deane, with that tendency to repress youthful hopes which stout and successful men of fifty find one of their easiest duties, "that's sooner said than done—sooner said than done."

"But didn't *you* get on in that way, uncle?" said Tom, a little irritated that Mr. Deane did not enter more rapidly into his views. "I mean, didn't you rise from one place to another through your abilities and good conduct?"

"Ay, ay, sir," said Mr. Deane, spreading himself in his chair a little, and entering with great readiness into a retrospect of his own career. "But I'll tell you how I got on. It wasn't by getting astride a stick, and thinking it would turn into a horse if I sat on it long enough. I kept my eyes and ears open, sir, and I wasn't too fond of my own back, and I made my master's interest my own. Why, with only looking into what went on in the mill, I found out how there was a waste of five hundred a-year that might be hindered. Why, sir, I hadn't more schooling to begin with than a charity boy; but I saw pretty soon that I couldn't get on far without mastering accounts,

and I learned 'em between working hours, after I'd been unlading. Look here." Mr. Deane opened a book, and pointed to the page. "I write a good hand enough, and I'll match anybody at all sorts of reckoning by the head, and I got it all by hard work, and paid for it out of my own earnings—often out of my own dinner and supper. And I looked into the nature of all the things we had to do with in the business, and picked up knowledge as I went about my work, and turned it over in my head. Why, I'm no mechanic—I never pretended to be—but I've thought of a thing or two that the mechanics never thought of, and it's made a fine difference in our returns. And there isn't an article shipped or unshipped at our wharf but I know the quality of it. If I got places, sir, it was because I made myself fit for 'em. If you want to slip into a round hole, you must make a ball of yourself—that's where it is."

Mr. Deane tapped his box again. He had been led on by pure enthusiasm in his subject, and had really forgotten what bearing this retrospective survey had on his listener. He had found occasion for saying the same thing more than once before, and was not distinctly aware that he had not his port-wine before him.

"Well, uncle," said Tom, with a slight complaint in his tone, "that's what I should like to do. Can't *I* get on in the same way?"

"In the same way?" said Mr. Deane, eyeing Tom with quiet deliberation. "There go two or three questions to that, Master Tom. That depends on what sort of material you are, to begin with, and whether you've been put into the right mill. But I'll tell you what it is. Your poor father went the wrong way to work in giving you an education. It wasn't my business, and I didn't interfere: but it is as I thought it would be. You've had a sort of learning that's all very well for a young fellow like our Mr. Stephen Guest, who'll have nothing to do but sign cheques all his life, and may as well have Latin inside his head as any other sort of stuffing."

"But, uncle," said Tom, earnestly, "I don't see why the Latin need hinder me from getting on in business. I shall soon forget it all: it makes no difference to me. I had to do my lessons at school; but I

always thought they'd never be of any use to me afterwards—I didn't care about them."

"Ay, ay, that's all very well," said Mr. Deane; "but it doesn't alter what I was going to say. Your Latin and rigmarole may soon dry off you, but you'll be but a bare stick after that. Besides, it's whitened your hands and taken the rough work out of you. And what do you know? Why, you know nothing about book-keeping, to begin with, and not so much of reckoning as a common shopman. You'll have to begin at a low round of the ladder, let me tell you, if you mean to get on in life. It's no use forgetting the education your father's been paying for, if you don't give yourself a new un."

Tom bit his lips hard; he felt as if the tears were rising, and he would rather die than let them.

"You want me to help you to a situation," Mr. Deane went on; "well, I've no fault to find with that. I'm willing to do something for you. But you youngsters nowadays think you're to begin with living well and working easy: you've no notion of running afoot before you get on horseback. Now, you must remember what you are— you're a lad of sixteen, trained to nothing particular. There's heaps of your sort, like so many pebbles, made to fit in nowhere. Well, you might be apprenticed to some business—a chemist's and druggist's perhaps: your Latin might come in a bit there…."

Tom was going to speak, but Mr. Deane put up his hand and said —

"Stop! hear what I've got to say. You don't want to be a 'prentice —I know, I know—you want to make more haste—and you don't want to stand behind a counter. But if you're a copying-clerk, you'll have to stand behind a desk, and stare at your ink and paper all day: there isn't much out-look there, and you won't be much wiser at the end of the year than at the beginning. The world isn't made of pen, ink, and paper, and if you're to get on in the world, young man, you must know what the world's made of. Now the best chance for you 'ud be to have a place on a wharf, or in a warehouse, where you'd learn the smell of things—but you wouldn't like that, I'll be bound;

you'd have to stand cold and wet, and be shouldered about by rough fellows. You're too fine a gentleman for that."

Mr. Deane paused and looked hard at Tom, who certainly felt some inward struggle before he could reply.

"I would rather do what will be best for me in the end, sir: I would put up with what was disagreeable."

"That's well, if you can carry it out. But you must remember it isn't only laying hold of a rope—you must go on pulling. It's the mistake you lads make that have got nothing either in your brains or your pocket, to think you've got a better start in the world if you stick yourselves in a place where you can keep your coats clean, and have the shop-wenches take you for fine gentlemen. That wasn't the way *I* started, young man': when I was sixteen, my jacket smelt of tar, and I wasn't afraid of handling cheeses. That's the reason I can wear good broadcloth now, and have my legs under the same table with the heads of the best firms in St. Ogg's."

Uncle Deane tapped his box, and seemed to expand a little under his waistcoat and gold chain, as he squared his shoulders in the chair.

"Is there any place at liberty that you know of now, uncle, that I should do for? I should like to set to work at once," said Tom, with a slight tremor in his voice.

"Stop a bit, stop a bit; we mustn't be in too great a hurry. You must bear in mind, if I put you in a place you're a bit young for, because you happen to be my nephew, I shall be responsible for you. And there's no better reason, you know, than your being my nephew; because it remains to be seen whether you're good for anything."

"I hope I should never do you any discredit, uncle," said Tom, hurt, as all boys are at the statement of the unpleasant truth that people feel no ground for trusting them. "I care about my own credit too much for that."

"Well done, Tom, well done! That's the right spirit, and I never refuse to help anybody if they've a mind to do themselves justice.

There's a young man of two-and-twenty I've got my eye on now. I shall do what I can for that young man—he's got some pith in him. But then, you see, he's made good use of his time—a first-rate calculator—can tell you the cubic contents of anything in no time, and put me up the other day to a new market for Swedish bark; he's uncommonly knowing in manufactures, that young fellow."

"I'd better set about learning book-keeping, hadn't I, uncle?" said Tom, anxious to prove his readiness to exert himself.

"Yes, yes, you can't do amiss there. But … ah, Spence, you're back again. Well, Tom, there's nothing more to be said just now, I think, and I must go to business again. Good-bye. Remember me to your mother."

Mr. Deane put out his hand, with an air of friendly dismissal, and Tom had not courage to ask another question, especially in the presence of Mr. Spence. So he went out again into the cold damp air. He had to call at his uncle Glegg's about the money in the Savings Bank, and by the time he set out again, the mist had thickened, and he could not see very far before him; but going along River Street again, he was startled, when he was within two yards of the projecting side of a shop-window, by the words "Dorlcote Mill" in large letters on a hand-bill, placed as if on purpose to stare at him. It was the catalogue of the sale to take place the next week—it was a reason for hurrying faster out of the town.

Poor Tom formed no visions of the distant future as he made his way homeward; he only felt that the present was very hard. It seemed a wrong towards him that his uncle Deane had no confidence in him—did not see at once that he should acquit himself well, which Tom himself was as certain of as of the daylight. Apparently he, Tom Tulliver, was likely to be held of small account in the world, and for the first time he felt a sinking of heart under the sense that he really was very ignorant, and could do very little. Who was that enviable young man, that could tell the cubic contents of things in no time, and make suggestions about Swedish bark? Swedish bark! Tom had been used to be so entirely satisfied with himself in spite of his breaking down in a demonstration, and

construing *nunc illas promite vires*, as “now promise those men;” but now he suddenly felt at a disadvantage, because he knew less than some one else knew. There must be a world of things connected with that Swedish bark, which, if he only knew them, might have helped him to get on. It would have been much easier to make a figure with a spirited horse and a new saddle.

Two hours ago, as Tom was walking to St. Ogg’s, he saw the distant future before him, as he might have seen a tempting stretch of smooth sandy beach beyond a belt of flinty shingles; he was on the grassy bank then, and thought the shingles might soon be passed. But now his feet were on the sharp stones; the belt of shingles had widened, and the stretch of sand had dwindled into narrowness.

“What did my uncle Deane say, Tom?” said Maggie, putting her arm through Tom’s as he was warming himself rather drearily by the kitchen fire. “Did he say he would give you a situation?”

“No, he didn’t say that. He didn’t quite promise me anything; he seemed to think I couldn’t have a very good situation. I’m too young.”

“But didn’t he speak kindly, Tom?”

“Kindly? Pooh! what’s the use of talking about that? I wouldn’t care about his speaking kindly, if I could get a situation. But it’s such a nuisance and bother—I’ve been at school all this while learning Latin and things—not a bit of good to me—and now my uncle says, I must set about learning book-keeping and calculation, and those things. He seems to make out I’m good for nothing.”

Tom’s mouth twitched with a bitter expression as he looked at the fire.

“O what a pity we haven’t got Dominie Sampson,” said Maggie, who couldn’t help mingling some gaiety with their sadness. “If he had taught me book-keeping by double entry and after the Italian method, as he did Lucy Bertram, I could teach you, Tom.”

“*You* teach! Yes, I daresay. That’s always the tone you take,” said Tom.

“Dear Tom! I was only joking,” said Maggie, putting her cheek against his coat-sleeve.

“But it’s always the same, Maggie,” said Tom, with the little frown he put on when he was about to be justifiably severe. “You’re always setting yourself up above me and every one else, and I’ve wanted to tell you about it several times. You ought not to have spoken as you did to my uncles and aunts—you should leave it to me to take care of my mother and you, and not put yourself forward. You think you know better than any one, but you’re almost always wrong. I can judge much better than you can.”

Poor Tom! he had just come from being lectured and made to feel his inferiority: the reaction of his strong, self-asserting nature must take place somehow; and here was a case in which he could justly show himself dominant. Maggie’s cheek flushed and her lip quivered with conflicting resentment and affection, and a certain awe as well as admiration of Tom’s firmer and more effective character. She did not answer immediately; very angry words rose to her lips, but they were driven back again, and she said at last—

“You often think I’m conceited, Tom, when I don’t mean what I say at all in that way. I don’t mean to put myself above you—I know you behaved better than I did yesterday. But you are always so harsh to me, Tom.”

With the last words the resentment was rising again.

“No, I’m not harsh,” said Tom, with severe decision. “I’m always kind to you; and so I shall be: I shall always take care of you. But you must mind what I say.”

Their mother came in now, and Maggie rushed away, that her burst of tears, which she felt must come, might not happen till she was safe up-stairs. They were very bitter tears: everybody in the world seemed so hard and unkind to Maggie: there was no indulgence, no fondness, such as she imagined when she fashioned the world afresh in her own thoughts. In books there were people who were always agreeable or tender, and delighted to do things that made one happy, and who did not show their kindness by

finding fault. The world outside the books was not a happy one, Maggie felt: it seemed to be a world where people behaved the best to those they did not pretend to love, and that did not belong to them. And if life had no love in it, what else was there for Maggie? Nothing but poverty and the companionship of her mother's narrow griefs—perhaps of her father's heart-cutting childish dependence. There is no hopelessness so sad as that of early youth, when the soul is made up of wants, and has no long memories, no superadded life in the life of others; though we who look on think lightly of such premature despair, as if our vision of the future lightened the blind sufferer's present.

Maggie in her brown frock, with her eyes reddened and her heavy hair pushed back, looking from the bed where her father lay, to the dull walls of this sad chamber which was the centre of her world, was a creature full of eager, passionate longings for all that was beautiful and glad; thirsty for all knowledge; with an ear straining after dreamy music that died away and would not come near to her; with a blind, unconscious yearning for something that would link together the wonderful impressions of this mysterious life, and give her soul a sense of home in it.

No wonder, when there is this contrast between the outward and the inward, that painful collisions come of it.

CHAPTER VI

Tending to Refute the Popular Prejudice Against the Present of a Pocket-knife

In that dark time of December, the sale of the household furniture lasted beyond the middle of the second day. Mr. Tulliver, who had begun, in his intervals of consciousness, to manifest an irritability which often appeared to have as a direct effect the recurrence of spasmodic rigidity and insensibility, had lain in this living death throughout the critical hours when the noise of the sale came nearest to his chamber. Mr. Turnbull had decided that it would be a less risk to let him remain where he was, than to move him to Luke's cottage—a plan which the good Luke had proposed to Mrs. Tulliver, thinking it would be very bad if the master were "to waken up" at the noise of the sale; and the wife and children had sat imprisoned in the silent chamber, watching the large prostrate figure on the bed, and trembling lest the blank face should suddenly show some response to the sounds which fell on their own ears with such obstinate, painful repetition.

But it was over at last—that time of importunate certainty and eye-straining suspense. The sharp sound of a voice, almost as metallic as the rap that followed it, had ceased; the tramping of footsteps on the gravel had died out. Mrs. Tulliver's blond face seemed aged ten years by the last thirty hours: the poor woman's mind had been busy divining when her favourite things were being knocked down by the terrible hammer; her heart had been fluttering at the thought that first one thing and then another had gone to be identified as hers in the hateful publicity of the Golden Lion; and all the while she had to sit and make no sign of this inward agitation. Such things bring lines in well-rounded faces, and broaden the streaks of white among the hairs that once looked as if they had been dipped in pure sunshine. Already, at three o'clock, Kezia, the good-hearted, bad-tempered housemaid, who regarded all people

that came to the sale as her personal enemies, the dirt on whose feet was of a peculiarly vile quality, had begun to scrub and swill with an energy much assisted by a continual low muttering against “folks as came to buy up other folks’s things,” and made light of “scrazing” the tops of mahogany tables over which better folks than themselves had had to—suffer a waste of tissue through evaporation. She was not scrubbing indiscriminately, for there would be further dirt of the same atrocious kind made by people who had still to fetch away their purchases: but she was bent on bringing the parlour, where that “pipe-smoking pig” the bailiff had sat, to such an appearance of scant comfort as could be given to it by cleanliness, and the few articles of furniture bought in for the family. Her mistress and the young folks should have their tea in it that night, Kezia was determined.

It was between five and six o’clock, near the usual tea-time, when she came up-stairs and said that Master Tom was wanted. The person who wanted him was in the kitchen, and in the first moments, by the imperfect fire and candle-light, Tom had not even an indefinite sense of any acquaintance with the rather broad-set but active figure, perhaps two years older than himself, that looked at him with a pair of blue eyes set in a disc of freckles, and pulled some curly red locks with a strong intention of respect. A low-crowned oilskin-covered hat, and a certain shiny deposit of dirt on the rest of the costume, as of tablets prepared for writing upon, suggested a calling that had to do with boats; but this did not help Tom’s memory.

“Sarvant, Mister Tom,” said he of the red locks, with a smile which seemed to break through a self-imposed air of melancholy. “You don’t know me again, I doubt,” he went on, as Tom continued to look at him inquiringly; “but I’d like to talk to you by yourself a bit, please.”

“There’s a fire i’ the parlour, Master Tom,” said Kezia, who objected to leaving the kitchen in the crisis of toasting.

“Come this way, then,” said Tom, wondering if this young fellow belonged to Guest & Co.’s Wharf; for his imagination ran continually

towards that particular spot, and uncle Deane might any time be sending for him to say that there was a situation at liberty.

The bright fire in the parlour was the only light that showed the few chairs, the bureau, the carpetless floor, and the one table—no, not the *one* table: there was a second table, in a corner, with a large Bible and a few other books upon it. It was this new strange bareness that Tom felt first, before he thought of looking again at the face which was also lit up by the fire, and which stole a half-shy, questioning glance at him as the entirely strange voice said—

"Why! you don't remember Bob, then, as you gen the pocketknife to, Mr. Tom?"

The rough-handled pocket-knife was taken out in the same moment, and the largest blade opened by way of irresistible demonstration.

"What! Bob Jakin?" said Tom—not with any cordial delight, for he felt a little ashamed of that early intimacy symbolised by the pocket-knife, and was not at all sure that Bob's motives for recalling it were entirely admirable.

"Ay, ay, Bob Jakin—if Jakin it must be, 'cause there's so many Bobs as you went arter the squerrils with, that day as I plumped right down from the bough, and bruised my shins a good un—but I got the squerril tight for all that, an' a scratter it was. An' this littlish blade's broke, you see, but I wouldn't hev a new 'un put in, 'cause they might be cheatin' me an' givin' me another knife istid, for there isn't such a blade i' the country—it's got used to my hand, like. An' there was niver nobody else gen me nothin' but what I got by my own sharpness, only you, Mr. Tom; if it wasn't Bill Fawks as gen me the terrier pup istid o' drowndin' it, an' I had to jaw him a good un afore he'd give it me."

Bob spoke with a sharp and rather treble volubility, and got through his long speech with surprising despatch, giving the blade of his knife an affectionate rub on his sleeve when he had finished.

"Well, Bob," said Tom, with a slight air of patronage, the foregoing reminiscences having disposed him to be as friendly as

was becoming, though there was no part of his acquaintance with Bob that he remembered better than the cause of their parting quarrel; “is there anything I can do for you?”

“Why, no, Mr. Tom,” answered Bob, shutting up his knife with a click and returning it to his pocket, where he seemed to be feeling for something else. “I shouldn’t ha’ come back upon you now ye’re i’ trouble, an’ folks say as the master, as I used to frighten the birds for, an’ he flogged me a bit for fun when he catched me eatin’ the turnip, as they say he’ll niver lift up his yead no more—I shouldn’t ha’ come now to ax you to gi’ me another knife, ’cause you gen me one afore. If a chap gives me one black eye, that’s enough for me: I shan’t ax him for another afore I sarve him out; an’ a good turn’s worth as much as a bad un, anyhow. I shall niver grow down’ards again, Mr. Tom, an’ you war the little chap as I liked the best when *I* war a little chap, for all you leathered me, and wouldn’t look at me again. There’s Dick Brumby, there, I could leather him as much as I’d a mind; but lors! you get tired o’ leatherin’ a chap when you can niver make him see what you want him to shy at. I’n seen chaps as ’ud stand starin’ at a bough till their eyes shot out, afore they’d see as a bird’s tail warn’t a leaf. It’s poor work goin’ wi’ such raff—but you war allays a rare un at shying, Mr. Tom, an’ I could trusten to you for droppin’ down wi’ your stick in the nick o’ time at a runnin’ rat, or a stoat, or that, when I war a-beatin’ the bushes.”

Bob had drawn out a dirty canvass bag, and would perhaps not have paused just then if Maggie had not entered the room and darted a look of surprise and curiosity at him, whereupon he pulled his red locks again with due respect. But the next moment the sense of the altered room came upon Maggie with a force that overpowered the thought of Bob’s presence. Her eyes had immediately glanced from him to the place where the bookcase had hung; there was nothing now but the oblong unfaded space on the wall, and below it the small table with the Bible and the few other books.

“O Tom,” she burst out, clasping her hands, “where are the books? I thought my uncle Glegg said he would buy them—didn’t

he?—are those all they've left us?"

"I suppose so," said Tom, with a sort of desperate indifference. "Why should they buy many books when they bought so little furniture?"

"O but, Tom," said Maggie, her eyes filling with tears, as she rushed up to the table to see what books had been rescued. "Our dear old Pilgrim's Progress that you coloured with your little paints; and that picture of Pilgrim with a mantle on, looking just like a turtle—O dear!" Maggie went on, half sobbing as she turned over the few books. "I thought we should never part with that while we lived—everything is going away from us—the end of our lives will have nothing in it like the beginning!"

Maggie turned away from the table and threw herself into a chair, with the big tears ready to roll down her cheeks—quite blinded to the presence of Bob, who was looking at her with the pursuant gaze of an intelligent dumb animal, with perceptions more perfect than his comprehension.

"Well, Bob," said Tom, feeling that the subject of the books was unseasonable, "I suppose you just came to see me because we're in trouble? That was very good-natured of you."

"I'll tell you how it is, Master Tom," said Bob, beginning to untwist his canvass bag. "You see, I'n been with a barge this two 'ear—that's how I'n been gettin' my livin'—if it wasn't when I was tentin' the furnace, between whiles, at Torry's mill. But a fortni't ago I'd a rare bit o' luck—I allays thought I was a lucky chap, for I never set a trap but what I catched something; but this wasn't a trap, it was a fire i' Torry's mill, an' I doused it, else it 'ud ha' set th' oil alight, an' the genelman gen me ten suvreigns—he gen me 'em himself last week. An' he said first, I was a sperrited chap—but I knowed that afore—but then he outs wi' the ten suvreigns, an' that war summat new. Here they are—all but one!" Here Bob emptied the canvass bag on the table. "An' when I'd got 'em, my head was all of a boil like a kettle o' broth, thinkin' what sort o' life I should take to—for there war a many trades I'd thought on; for as for the

barge, I'm clean tired out wi't, for it pulls the days out till they're as long as pigs' chitterlings. An' I thought first I'd ha' ferrets an' dogs, an' be a rat-catcher; an' then I thought as I should like a bigger way o' life, as I didn't know so well; for I'n seen to the bottom o' rat-catching; an' I thought, an' thought, till at last I settled I'd be a packman, for they're knowin' fellers, the packmen are—an' I'd carry the lightest things I could i' my pack—an' there'd be a use for a feller's tongue, as is no use neither wi' rats nor barges. An' I should go about the country far an' wide, an' come round the women wi' my tongue, an' get my dinner hot at the public—lors! it 'ud be a lovely life!"

Bob paused, and then said, with defiant decision, as if resolutely turning his back on that paradisaic picture—

"But I don't mind about it—not a chip! An' I'n changed one o' the suvreigns to buy my mother a goose for dinner, an' I'n bought a blue plush wescoat, an' a sealskin cap—for if I meant to be a packman, I'd do it respectable. But I don't mind about it—not a chip! My yead isn't a turnip, an' I shall p'r'aps have a chance o' dousing another fire afore long. I'm a lucky chap. So I'll thank you to take the nine suvreigns, Mr. Tom, and set yoursen up with 'em somehow—if it's true as the master's broke. They mayn't go fur enough—but they'll help."

Tom was touched keenly enough to forget his pride and suspicion.

"You're a very kind fellow, Bob," he said, colouring, with that little diffident tremor in his voice, which gave a certain charm even to Tom's pride and severity, "and I shan't forget you again, though I didn't know you this evening. But I can't take the nine sovereigns: I should be taking your little fortune from you, and they wouldn't do me much good either."

"Wouldn't they, Mr. Tom?" said Bob, regretfully. "Now don't say so 'cause you think I want 'em. I aren't a poor chap. My mother gets a good penn'orth wi' picking feathers an' things; an' if she eats nothin' but bread-an'-water, it runs to fat. An' I'm such a lucky chap: an' I doubt you aren't quite so lucky, Mr. Tom—th' old master isn't,

anyhow—an' so you might take a slice o' my luck, an' no harm done. Lors! I found a leg o' pork i' the river one day: it had tumbled out o' one o' them round-sterned Dutchmen, I'll be bound. Come, think better on it, Mr. Tom, for old 'quinetance sake—else I shall think you bear me a grudge."

Bob pushed the sovereigns forward, but before Tom could speak, Maggie, clasping her hands, and looking penitently at Bob, said—

"O, I'm so sorry, Bob—I never thought you were so good. Why, I think you're the kindest person in the world!"

Bob had not been aware of the injurious opinion for which Maggie was performing an inward act of penitence, but he smiled with pleasure at this handsome eulogy—especially from a young lass who, as he informed his mother that evening, had "such uncommon eyes, they looked somehow as they made him feel nohow."

"No, indeed, Bob, I can't take them," said Tom; "but don't think I feel your kindness less because I say no. I don't want to take anything from anybody, but to work my own way. And those sovereigns wouldn't help me much—they wouldn't, really—if I were to take them. Let me shake hands with you instead."

Tom put out his pink palm, and Bob was not slow to place his hard, grimy hand within it.

"Let me put the sovereigns in the bag again," said Maggie; "and you'll come and see us when you've bought your pack, Bob."

"It's like as if I'd come out o' make-believe, o' purpose to show 'em you," said Bob, with an air of discontent, as Maggie gave him the bag again, "a-taking 'em back i' this way. I *am* a bit of a Do, you know; but it isn't that sort o' Do: it's on'y when a feller's a big rogue, or a big flat, I like to let him in a bit, that's all."

"Now, don't you be up to any tricks, Bob," said Tom, "else you'll get transported some day."

"No, no; not me, Mr. Tom," said Bob, with an air of cheerful confidence. "There's no law again' fleabites. If I wasn't to take a fool

in now and then, he'd niver get any wiser. But, lors! hev a suvreign to buy you and Miss summat, on'y for a token—just to match my pocket-knife."

While Bob was speaking he laid down the sovereign, and resolutely twisted up his bag again. Tom pushed back the gold, and said, "No, indeed, Bob; thank you heartily; but I can't take it." And Maggie, taking it between her fingers, held it up to Bob, and said, more persuasively—

"Not now—but perhaps another time. If ever Tom or my father wants help that you can give, we'll let you know—won't we, Tom? That's what you would like—to have us always depend on you as a friend that we can go to—isn't it, Bob?"

"Yes, Miss, and thank you," said Bob, reluctantly taking the money; "that's what I'd like—anything as you like. An' I wish you good-bye, Miss, and good-luck, Mr. Tom, and thank you for shaking hands wi' me, *though* you wouldn't take the money."

Kezia's entrance, with very black looks, to inquire if she shouldn't bring in the tea now, or whether the toast was to get hardened to a brick, was a seasonable check on Bob's flux of words, and hastened his parting bow.

CHAPTER VII

How a Hen Takes to Stratagem

The days passed, and Mr. Tulliver showed, at least to the eyes of the medical man, stronger and stronger symptoms of a gradual return to his normal condition: the paralytic obstruction was, little by little, losing its tenacity, and the mind was rising from under it with fitful struggles, like a living creature making its way from under a great snowdrift, that slides and slides again and shuts up the newly-made opening.

Time would have seemed to creep to the watchers by the bed, if it had only been measured by the doubtful distant hope which kept count of the moments within the chamber; but it was measured for them by a fast-approaching dread which made the nights come too quickly. While Mr. Tulliver was slowly becoming himself again, his lot was hastening towards its moment of most palpable change. The taxing-masters had done their work like any respectable gunsmith conscientiously preparing the musket, that, duly pointed by a brave arm, will spoil a life or two. Allocaturs, filing of bills in Chancery, decrees of sale, are legal chain-shot or bomb-shells that can never hit a solitary mark, but must fall with widespread shattering. So deeply inherent is it in this life of ours that men have to suffer for each other's sins, so inevitably diffusive is human suffering, that even justice makes its victims, and we can conceive no retribution that does not spread beyond its mark in pulsations of unmerited pain.

By the beginning of the second week in January the bills were out advertising the sale, under a decree of Chancery, of Mr. Tulliver's farming and other stock, to be followed by a sale of the mill and land, held in the proper after-dinner hour at the Golden Lion. The miller himself, unaware of the lapse of time, fancied himself still in that first stage of his misfortunes when expedients might be thought

of; and often in his conscious hours talked in a feeble, disjointed manner, of plans he would carry out when he “got well.” The wife and children were not without hope of an issue that would at least save Mr. Tulliver from leaving the old spot, and seeking an entirely strange life. For uncle Deane had been induced to interest himself in this stage of the business. It would not, he acknowledged, be a bad speculation for Guest & Co. to buy Dorlcote Mill, and carry on the business, which was a good one, and might be increased by the addition of steam-power; in which case Tulliver might be retained as manager. Still Mr. Deane would say nothing decided about the matter: the fact that Wakem held the mortgage on the land might put it into his head to bid for the whole estate, and further, to outbid the cautious firm of Guest & Co., who did not carry on business on sentimental grounds. Mr. Deane was obliged to tell Mrs. Tulliver something to that effect, when he rode over to the mill to inspect the books in company with Mrs. Glegg: for she had observed that “if Guest & Co. would only think about it, Mr. Tulliver’s father and grandfather had been carrying on Dorlcote Mill long before the oil-mill of that firm had been so much as thought of.” Mr. Deane, in reply, doubted whether that was precisely the relation between the two mills which would determine their value as investments. As for uncle Glegg, the thing lay quite beyond his imagination; the good-natured man felt sincere pity for the Tulliver family, but his money was all locked up in excellent mortgages, and he could run no risk; that would be unfair to his own relatives; but he had made up his mind that Tulliver should have some new flannel waistcoats which he had himself renounced in favour of a more elastic commodity, and that he would buy Mrs. Tulliver a pound of tea now and then; it would be a journey which his benevolence delighted in beforehand, to carry the tea, and see her pleasure on being assured it was the best black.

Still, it was clear that Mr. Deane was kindly disposed towards the Tullivers. One day he had brought Lucy, who was come home for the Christmas holidays, and the little blond angel-head had pressed itself against Maggie’s darker cheek with many kisses and some

tears. These fair slim daughters keep up a tender spot in the heart of many a respectable partner in a respectable firm, and perhaps Lucy's anxious pitying questions about her poor cousins helped to make uncle Deane more prompt in finding Tom a temporary place in the warehouse, and in putting him in the way of getting evening lessons in book-keeping and calculation.

That might have cheered the lad and fed his hopes a little, if there had not come at the same time the much-dreaded blow of finding that his father must be a bankrupt, after all; at least, the creditors must be asked to take less than their due, which to Tom's untechnical mind was the same thing as bankruptcy. His father must not only be said to have "lost his property," but to have "failed"—the word that carried the worst obloquy to Tom's mind. For when the defendant's claim for costs had been satisfied, there would remain the friendly bill of Mr. Gore, and the deficiency at the bank, as well as the other debts, which would make the assets shrink into unequivocal disproportion: "not more than ten or twelve shillings in the pound," predicted Mr. Deane, in a decided tone, tightening his lips; and the words fell on Tom like a scalding liquid, leaving a continual smart.

He was sadly in want of something to keep up his spirits a little in the unpleasant newness of his position—suddenly transported from the easy carpeted ennui of study-hours at Mr. Stelling's, and the busy idleness of castle-building in a "last half "at school, to the companionship of sacks and hides, and bawling men thundering down heavy weights at his elbow. The first step towards getting on in the world was a chill, dusty, noisy affair, and implied going without one's tea in order to stay in St. Ogg's and have an evening lesson from a one-armed elderly clerk, in a room smelling strongly of bad tobacco. Tom's young pink-and-white face had its colours very much deadened by the time he took off his hat at home, and sat down with keen hunger to his supper. No wonder he was a little cross if his mother or Maggie spoke to him.

But all this while Mrs. Tulliver was brooding over a scheme by which she, and no one else, would avert the result most to be

dreaded, and prevent Wakem from entertaining the purpose of bidding for the mill. Imagine a truly respectable and amiable hen, by some portentous anomaly, taking to reflection and inventing combinations by which she might prevail on Hodge not to wring her neck, or send her and her chicks to market: the result could hardly be other than much cackling and fluttering. Mrs. Tulliver, seeing that everything had gone wrong, had begun to think that she had been too passive in life; and that, if she had applied her mind to business, and taken a strong resolution now and then, it would have been all the better for her and her family. Nobody, it appeared, had thought of going to speak to Wakem on this business of the mill; and yet, Mrs. Tulliver reflected, it would have been quite the shortest method of securing the right end. It would have been of no use, to be sure, for Mr. Tulliver to go—even if he had been able and willing—for he had been "going to law against Wakem" and abusing him for the last ten years; Wakem was always likely to have a spite against him. And now that Mrs. Tulliver had come to the conclusion that her husband was very much in the wrong to bring her into this trouble, she was inclined to think that his opinion of Wakem was wrong too. To be sure, Wakem had "put the bailies in the house, and sold them up;" but she supposed he did that to please the man that lent Mr. Tulliver the money, for a lawyer had more folks to please than one, and he wasn't likely to put Mr. Tulliver, who had gone to law with him, above everybody else in the world. The attorney might be a very reasonable man—why not? He had married a Miss Clint, and at the time Mrs. Tulliver had heard of that marriage, the summer when she wore her blue satin spencer, and had not yet any thoughts of Mr. Tulliver, she knew no harm of Wakem. And certainly towards herself—whom he knew to have been a Miss Dodson—it was out of all possibility that he could entertain anything but goodwill, when it was once brought home to his observation that she, for her part, had never wanted to go to law, and indeed was at present disposed to take Mr. Wakem's view of all subjects rather than her husband's. In fact, if that attorney saw a respectable matron like herself disposed "to give him good words," why shouldn't he listen to her representations? For she

would put the matter clearly before him, which had never been done yet. And he would never go and bid for the mill on purpose to spite her, an innocent woman, who thought it likely enough that she had danced with him in their youth at Squire Darleigh's, for at those big dances she had often and often danced with young men whose names she had forgotten.

Mrs. Tulliver hid these reasonings in her own bosom; for when she had thrown out a hint to Mr. Deane and Mr. Glegg, that she wouldn't mind going to speak to Wakem herself, they had said, "No, no, no," and "Pooh, pooh," and "Let Wakem alone," in the tone of men who were not likely to give a candid attention to a more definite exposition of her project; still less dared she mention the plan to Tom and Maggie, for "the children were always so against everything their mother said;" and Tom, she observed, was almost as much set against Wakem as his father was. But this unusual concentration of thought naturally gave Mrs. Tulliver an unusual power of device and determination; and a day or two before the sale, to be held at the Golden Lion, when there was no longer any time to be lost, she carried out her plan by a stratagem. There were pickles in question—a large stock of pickles and ketchup which Mrs. Tulliver possessed, and which Mr. Hyndmarsh the grocer would certainly purchase if she could transact the business in a personal interview, so she would walk with Tom to St. Ogg's that morning: and when Tom urged that she might let the pickles be, at present—he didn't like her to go about just yet—she appeared so hurt at this conduct in her son, contradicting her about pickles which she had made after the family receipts inherited from his own grandmother, who had died when his mother was a little girl, that he gave way, and they walked together until she turned towards Danish Street, where Mr. Hyndmarsh retailed his grocery, not far from the offices of Mr. Wakem.

That gentleman was not yet come to his office: would Mrs. Tulliver sit down by the fire in his private room and wait for him? She had not long to wait before the punctual attorney entered, knitting his brow with an examining glance at the stout blond

woman who rose, curtsying deferentially:—a tallish man, with an aquiline nose and abundant iron-grey hair. You have never seen Mr. Wakem before, and are possibly wondering whether he was really as eminent a rascal, and as crafty, bitter an enemy of honest humanity in general, and of Mr. Tulliver in particular, as he is represented to be in that eidolon or portrait of him which we have seen to exist in the miller's mind.

It is clear that the irascible miller was a man to interpret any chance-shot that grazed him as an attempt on his own life, and was liable to entanglements in this puzzling world, which, due consideration had to his own infallibility, required the hypothesis of a very active diabolical agency to explain them. It is still possible to believe that the attorney was not more guilty towards him, than an ingenious machine, which performs its work with much regularity, is guilty towards the rash man who, venturing too near it, is caught up by some fly-wheel or other, and suddenly converted into unexpected mince-meat.

But it is really impossible to decide this question by a glance at his person: the lines and lights of the human countenance are like other symbols—not always easy to read without a key. On an *a priori* view of Wakem's aquiline nose, which offended Mr. Tulliver, there was not more rascality than in the shape of his stiff shirt-collar, though this too, along with his nose, might have become fraught with damnatory meaning when once the rascality was ascertained.

"Mrs. Tulliver, I think?" said Mr. Wakem.

"Yes, sir. Miss Elizabeth Dodson as was."

"Pray be seated. You have some business with me?"

"Well, sir, yes," said Mrs. Tulliver, beginning to feel alarmed at her own courage, now she was really in presence of the formidable man, and reflecting that she had not settled with herself how she should begin. Mr. Wakem felt in his waistcoat pockets, and looked at her in silence.

“I hope, sir,” she began at last—“I hope, sir, you’re not a-thinking as *I* bear you any ill-will because o’ my husband’s losing his lawsuit, and the bailies being put in, and the linen being sold—O dear!…for I wasn’t brought up in that way. I’m sure you remember my father, sir, for he was close friends with Squire Darleigh, and we allays went to the dances there—the Miss Dodsons—nobody could be more looked on—and justly, for there was four of us, and you’re quite aware as Mrs. Glegg and Mrs. Deane are my sisters. And as for going to law, and losing money, and having sales before you’re dead, I never saw anything o’ that before I was married, nor for a long while after. And I’m not to be answerable for my bad luck i’ marrying out o’ my own family into one where the goings-on was different. And as for being drawn in t’ abuse you as other folks abuse you, sir, *that* I niver was, and nobody can say it of me.”

Mrs. Tulliver shook her head a little, and looked at the hem of her pocket-handkerchief.

“I’ve no doubt of what you say, Mrs. Tulliver,” said Mr. Wakem, with cold politeness. “But you have some question to ask me?”

“Well, sir, yes. But that’s what I’ve said to myself—I’ve said you’d have some nat’ral feeling; and as for my husband, as hasn’t been himself for this two months, I’m not a-defending him, in no way, for being so hot about th’ erigation—not but what there’s worse men, for he never wronged nobody of a shilling nor a penny, not willingly—and as for his fieriness and lawing, what could I do? And him struck as if it was with death when he got the letter as said you’d the hold upo’ the land. But I can’t believe what you’ll behave as a gentleman.”

“What does all this mean, Mrs. Tulliver?” said Mr. Wakem, rather sharply. “What do you want to ask me?”

“Why, sir, if you’ll be so good,” said Mrs. Tulliver, starting a little, and speaking more hurriedly, “if you’ll be so good not to buy the mill an’ the land—the land wouldn’t so much matter, only my husband ’ull be like mad at your having it.”

Something like a new thought flashed across Mr. Wakem's face as he said, "Who told you I meant to buy it?"

"Why, sir, it's none o' my inventing; and I should never ha' thought of it, for my husband, as ought to know about the law, he allays used to say as lawyers had never no call to buy anything—either lands or houses—for they allays got 'em into their hands other ways. An' I should think that 'ud be the way with you, sir; and I niver said as you'd be the man to do contrairy to that."

"Ah, well, who was it that *did* say so?" said Wakem, opening his desk, and moving things about, with the accompaniment of an almost inaudible whistle.

"Why, sir, it was Mr. Glegg and Mr. Deane, as have all the management: and Mr. Deane thinks as Guest & Co. 'ud buy the mill and let Mr. Tulliver work it for 'em, if you didn't bid for it and raise the price. And it 'ud be such a thing for my husband to stay where he is, if he could get his living: for it was his father's before him, the mill was, and his grandfather built it, though I wasn't fond o' the noise of it, when first I was married, for there was no mills in our family—not the Dodsons'—and if I'd known as the mills had so much to do with the law, it wouldn't have been me as 'ud have been the first Dodson to marry one; but I went into it blindfold, that I did, erigation and everything."

"What! Guest & Co. will keep the mill in their own hands, I suppose, and pay your husband wages?"

"O dear, sir, it's hard to think of," said poor Mrs. Tulliver, a little tear making its way, "as my husband should take wage. But it 'ud look more like what used to be, to stay at the mill than to go anywhere else: and if you'll only think—if you was to bid for the mill and buy it, my husband might be struck worse than he was before, and niver get better again as he's getting now."

"Well, but if I bought the mill, and allowed your husband to act as my manager in the same way, how then?" said Mr. Wakem.

"O sir, I doubt he could niver be got to do it, not if the very mill stood still to beg and pray of him. For your name's like poison to

him, it's so as never was; and he looks upon it as you've been the ruin of him all along, ever since you set the law on him about the road through the meadow—that's eight year ago, and he's been going on ever since—as I've allays told him he was wrong.…"

"He's a pig-headed, foul-mouthed fool!" burst out Mr. Wakem, forgetting himself.

"O dear, sir!" said Mrs. Tulliver, frightened at a result so different from the one she had fixed her mind on; "I wouldn't wish to contradict you, but it's like enough he's changed his mind with this illness—he's forgot a many things he used to talk about. And you wouldn't like to have a corpse on your mind, if he was to die; and they *do* say as it's allays unlucky when Dorlcote Mill changes hands, and the water might all run away, and *then* … not as I'm wishing you any ill-luck, sir, for I forgot to tell you as I remember your wedding as if it was yesterday—Mrs. Wakem was a Miss Clint, I know *that*—and my boy, as there isn't a nicer, handsomer, straighter boy nowhere, to school with your son.…"

Mr. Wakem rose, opened the door, and called to one of his clerks.

"You must excuse me for interrupting you, Mrs. Tulliver; I have business that must be attended to; and I think there is nothing more necessary to be said."

"But if you *would* bear it in mind, sir," said Mrs. Tulliver, rising, "and not run against me and my children; and I'm not denying Mr. Tulliver's been in the wrong, but he's been punished enough, and there's worse men, for it's been giving to other folks has been his fault. He's done nobody any harm but himself and his family—the more's the pity—and I go and look at the bare shelves every day, and think where all my things used to stand."

"Yes, yes, I'll bear it in mind," said Mr. Wakem, hastily, looking towards the open door.

"And if you'd please not to say as I've been to speak to you, for my son 'ud be very angry with me for demeaning myself, I know he would, and I've trouble enough without being scolded by my children."

Poor Mrs. Tulliver's voice trembled a little, and she could make no answer to the attorney's "good morning," but curtsied and walked out in silence.

"Which day is it that Dorlcote Mill is to be sold? Where's the bill?" said Mr. Wakem to his clerk when they were alone.

"Next Friday is the day: Friday, at six o'clock."

"Oh! just run to Winship's the auctioneer, and see if he's at home. I have some business for him: ask him to come up."

Although, when Mr. Wakem entered his office that morning, he had had no intention of purchasing Dorlcote Mill, his mind was already made up: Mrs. Tulliver had suggested to him several determining motives, and his mental glance was very rapid: he was one of those men who can be prompt without being rash, because their motives run in fixed tracks, and they have no need to reconcile conflicting aims.

To suppose that Wakem had the same sort of inveterate hatred towards Tulliver, that Tulliver had towards him, would be like supposing that a pike and a roach can look at each other from a similar point of view. The roach necessarily abhors the mode in which the pike gets his living, and the pike is likely to think nothing further even of the most indignant roach than that he is excellent good eating; it could only be when the roach choked him that the pike could entertain a strong personal animosity. If Mr. Tulliver had ever seriously injured or thwarted the attorney, Wakem would not have refused him the distinction of being a special object of his vindictiveness. But when Mr. Tulliver called Wakem a rascal at the market dinner-table, the attorney's clients were not a whit inclined to withdraw their business from him; and if, when Wakem himself happened to be present, some jocose cattle-feeder, stimulated by opportunity and brandy, made a thrust at him by alluding to old ladies' wills, he maintained perfect *sang froid*, and knew quite well that the majority of substantial men then present were perfectly contented with the fact that "Wakem was Wakem;" that is to say, a man who always knew the stepping-stones that would carry him

through very muddy bits of practice. A man who had made a large fortune, had a handsome house among the trees at Tofton, and decidedly the finest stock of port-wine in the neighbourhood of St. Ogg's, was likely to feel himself on a level with public opinion. And I am not sure that even honest Mr. Tulliver himself, with his general view of law as a cockpit, might not, under opposite circumstances, have seen a fine appropriateness in the truth that "Wakem was Wakem;" since I have understood from persons versed in history, that mankind is not disposed to look narrowly into the conduct of great victors when their victory is on the right side. Tulliver, then, could be no obstruction to Wakem; on the contrary, he was a poor devil whom the lawyer had defeated several times—a hot-tempered fellow, who would always give you a handle against him. Wakem's conscience was not uneasy because he had used a few tricks against the miller: why should he hate that unsuccessful plaintiff—that pitiable, furious bull entangled in the meshes of a net?

Still, among the various excesses to which human nature is subject, moralists have never numbered that of being too fond of the people who openly revile us. The successful Yellow candidate for the borough of Old Topping, perhaps, feels no pursuant meditative hatred toward the Blue editor who consoles his subscribers with vituperative rhetoric against Yellow men who sell their country, and are the demons of private life; but he might not be sorry, if law and opportunity favoured, to kick that Blue editor to a deeper shade of his favourite colour. Prosperous men take a little vengeance now and then, as they take a diversion, when it comes easily in their way, and is no hindrance to business; and such small unimpassioned revenges have an enormous effect in life, running through all degrees of pleasant infliction, blocking the fit men out of places, and blackening characters in unpremeditated talk. Still more, to see people who have been only insignificantly offensive to us, reduced in life and humiliated without any special efforts of ours, is apt to have a soothing, flattering influence: Providence, or some other prince of this world, it appears, has undertaken the task of

retribution for us; and really, by an agreeable constitution of things, our enemies somehow *don't* prosper.

Wakem was not without this parenthetic vindictiveness towards the uncomplimentary miller; and now Mrs. Tulliver had put the notion into his head, it presented itself to him as a pleasure to do the very thing that would cause Mr. Tulliver the most deadly mortification,—and a pleasure of a complex kind, not made up of crude malice, but mingling with it the relish of self-approbation. To see an enemy humiliated gives a certain contentment, but this is jejune compared with the highly blent satisfaction of seeing him humiliated by your benevolent action or concession on his behalf. That is a sort of revenge which falls into the scale of virtue, and Wakem was not without an intention of keeping that scale respectably filled. He had once had the pleasure of putting an old enemy of his into one of the St. Ogg's alms-houses, to the rebuilding of which he had given a large subscription; and here was an opportunity of providing for another by making him his own servant. Such things give a completeness to prosperity, and contribute elements of agreeable consciousness that are not dreamed of by that short-sighted, over-heated vindictiveness, which goes out of its way to wreak itself in direct injury. And Tulliver, with his rough tongue filed by a sense of obligation, would make a better servant than any chance-fellow who was cap-in-hand for a situation. Tulliver was known to be a man of proud honesty, and Wakem was too acute not to believe in the existence of honesty. He was given to observing individuals, not to judging of them according to maxims, and no one knew better than he that all men were not like himself. Besides, he intended to overlook the whole business of land and mill pretty closely: he was fond of these practical rural matters. But there were good reasons for purchasing Dorlcote Mill, quite apart from any benevolent vengeance on the miller. It was really a capital investment; besides, Guest & Co. were going to bid for it. Mr. Guest and Mr. Wakem were on friendly dining terms, and the attorney liked to predominate over a ship-owner and mill-owner who was a little too loud in the town affairs as well as in his table-talk. For

Wakem was not a mere man of business: he was considered a pleasant fellow in the upper circles of St. Ogg's—chatted amusingly over his port-wine, did a little amateur farming, and had certainly been an excellent husband and father: at church, when he went there, he sat under the handsomest of mural monuments erected to the memory of his wife. Most men would have married again under his circumstances, but he was said to be more tender to his deformed son than most men were to their best-shapen offspring. Not that Mr. Wakem had not other sons besides Philip; but towards them he held only a chiaroscuro parentage, and provided for them in a grade of life duly beneath his own. In this fact, indeed, there lay the clenching motive to the purchase of Dorlcote Mill. While Mrs. Tulliver was talking, it had occurred to the rapid-minded lawyer, among all the other circumstances of the case, that this purchase would, in a few years to come, furnish a highly suitable position for a certain favourite lad whom he meant to bring on in the world.

These were the mental conditions on which Mrs. Tulliver had undertaken to act persuasively, and had failed: a fact which may receive some illustration from the remark of a great philosopher, that fly-fishers fail in preparing their bait so as to make it alluring in the right quarter, for want of a due acquaintance with the subjectivity of fishes.

CHAPTER VIII

Daylight on the Wreck

It was a clear frosty January day on which Mr. Tulliver first came down-stairs: the bright sun on the chestnut boughs and the roofs opposite his window had made him impatiently declare that he would be caged up no longer: he thought everywhere would be more cheery under this sunshine than his bedroom; for he knew nothing of the bareness below, which made the flood of sunshine importunate, as if it had an unfeeling pleasure in showing the empty places, and the marks where well-known objects once had been. The impression on his mind that it was but yesterday when he received the letter from Mr. Gore was so continually implied in his talk, and the attempts to convey to him the idea that many weeks had passed and much had happened since then, had been so soon swept away by recurrent forgetfulness, that even Mr. Turnbull had begun to despair of preparing him to meet the facts by previous knowledge. The full sense of the present could only be imparted gradually by new experience—not by mere words, which must remain weaker than the impressions left by the *old* experience. This resolution to come down-stairs was heard with trembling by the wife and children. Mrs. Tulliver said Tom must not go to St. Ogg's at the usual hour—he must wait and see his father down-stairs: and Tom complied, though with an intense inward shrinking from the painful scene. The hearts of all three had been more deeply dejected than ever during the last few days. For Guest & Co. had not bought the mill: both mill and land had been knocked down to Wakem, who had been over the premises, and had laid before Mr. Deane and Mr. Glegg, in Mrs. Tulliver's presence, his willingness to employ Mr. Tulliver, in case of his recovery, as a manager of the business. This proposition had occasioned much family debating. Uncles and aunts were almost unanimously of opinion that such an offer ought not to be rejected when there was nothing in the way but a feeling in Mr.

Tulliver's mind, which, as neither aunts nor uncles shared it, was regarded as entirely unreasonable and childish—indeed, as a transferring towards Wakem of that indignation and hatred which Mr. Tulliver ought properly to have directed against himself for his general quarrelsomeness, and his special exhibition of it in going to law. Here was an opportunity for Mr. Tulliver to provide for his wife and daughter without any assistance from his wife's relations, and without that too evident descent into pauperism which makes it annoying to respectable people to meet the degraded member of the family by the wayside. Mr. Tulliver, Mrs. Glegg considered, must be made to feel, when he came to his right mind, that he could never humble himself enough; for *that* had come which she had always foreseen would come of his insolence in time past "to them as were the best friends he'd got to look to." Mr. Glegg and Mr. Deane were less stern in their views, but they both of them thought Tulliver had done enough harm by his hot-tempered crotchets, and ought to put them out of the question when a livelihood was offered him: Wakem showed a right feeling about the matter—*he* had no grudge against Tulliver. Tom had protested against entertaining the proposition: he shouldn't like his father to be under Wakem; he thought it would look mean-spirited; but his mother's main distress was the utter impossibility of ever "turning Mr. Tulliver round about Wakem," or getting him to hear reason—no, they would all have to go and live in a pigsty on purpose to spite Wakem, who spoke "so as nobody could be fairer." Indeed, Mrs. Tulliver's mind was reduced to such confusion by living in this strange medium of unaccountable sorrow, against which she continually appealed by asking, "O dear, what *have* I done to deserve worse than other women?" that Maggie began to suspect her poor mother's wits were quite going.

"Tom," she said, when they were out of their father's room together, "we *must* try to make father understand a little of what has happened before he goes down-stairs. But we must get my mother away. She will say something that will do harm. Ask Kezia to fetch her down, and keep her engaged with something in the kitchen."

Kezia was equal to the task. Having declared her intention of staying till the master could get about again, “wage or no wage,” she had found a certain recompense in keeping a strong hand over her mistress, scolding her for “moithering” herself, and going about all day without changing her cap, and looking as if she was “mushed.” Altogether, this time of trouble was rather a Saturnalian time to Kezia: she could scold her betters with unreproved freedom. On this particular occasion there were drying clothes to be fetched in: she wished to know if one pair of hands could do everything indoors and out, and observed that *she* should have thought it would be good for Mrs. Tulliver to put on her bonnet, and get a breath of fresh air by doing that needful piece of work. Poor Mrs. Tulliver went submissively down-stairs: to be ordered about by a servant was the last remnant of her household dignities—she would soon have no servant to scold her.

Mr. Tulliver was resting in his chair a little after the fatigue of dressing, and Maggie and Tom were seated near him, when Luke entered to ask if he should help master down-stairs.

“Ay, ay, Luke, stop a bit, sit down,” said Mr. Tulliver, pointing his stick towards a chair, and looking at him with that pursuant gaze which convalescent persons often have for those who have tended them, reminding one of an infant gazing about after its nurse. For Luke had been a constant night-watcher by his master’s bed.

“How’s the water now, eh, Luke?” said Mr. Tulliver. “Dix hasn’t been choking you up again, eh?”

“No, sir, it’s all right.”

“Ay, I thought not: he won’t be in a hurry at that again, now Riley’s been to settle him. That was what I said to Riley yesterday … I said …”

Mr. Tulliver leaned forward, resting his elbows on the armchair, and looking on the ground as if in search of something—striving after vanishing images like a man struggling against a doze. Maggie looked at Tom in mute distress—their father’s mind was so far off the present, which would by-and-by thrust itself on his wandering

consciousness! Tom was almost ready to rush away, with that impatience of painful emotion which makes one of the differences between youth and maiden, man and woman.

"Father," said Maggie, laying her hand on his, "don't you remember that Mr. Riley is dead?"

"Dead?" said Mr. Tulliver, sharply, looking in her face with a strange, examining glance.

"Yes, he died of apoplexy nearly a year ago; I remember hearing you say you had to pay money for him; and he left his daughters badly off—one of them is under-teacher at Miss Firniss's, where I've been to school, you know…."

"Ah?" said her father, doubtfully, still looking in her face. But as soon as Tom began to speak he turned to look at *him* with the same inquiring glances, as if he were rather surprised at the presence of these two young people. Whenever his mind was wandering in the far past, he fell into this oblivion of their actual faces: they were not those of the lad and the little wench who belonged to that past.

"It's a long while since you had the dispute with Dix, father," said Tom. "I remember your talking about it three years ago, before I went to school at Mr. Stelling's. I've been at school there three years; don't you remember?"

Mr. Tulliver threw himself backward again, losing the childlike outward glance under a rush of new ideas, which diverted him from external impressions.

"Ay, ay," he said, after a minute or two, "I've paid a deal o' money…. I was determined my son should have a good eddication: I'd none myself, and I've felt the miss of it. And he'll want no other fortin: that's what I say … if Wakem was to get the better of me again…."

The thought of Wakem roused new vibrations, and after a moment's pause he began to look at the coat he had on, and to feel in his side-pocket. Then he turned to Tom, and said, in his old sharp way, "Where have they put Gore's letter?"

It was close at hand in a drawer, for he had often asked for it before.

“You know what there is in the letter, father?” said Tom, as he gave it to him.

“To be sure I do,” said Mr. Tulliver, rather angrily. “What o’ that? If Furley can’t take to the property, somebody else can: there’s plenty o’ people in the world besides Furley. But it’s hindering—my not being well—go and tell ’em to get the horse in the gig, Luke: I can get down to St. Ogg’s well enough—Gore’s expecting me.”

“No, dear father!” Maggie burst out entreatingly, “it’s a very long while since all that: you’ve been ill a great many weeks—more than two months—everything is changed.”

Mr. Tulliver looked at them all three alternately with a startled gaze: the idea that much had happened of which he knew nothing had often transiently arrested him before, but it came upon him now with entire novelty.

“Yes, father,” said Tom, in answer to the gaze. “You needn’t trouble your mind about business until you are quite well: everything is settled about that for the present—about the mill and the land and the debts.”

“What’s settled, then?” said his father, angrily.

“Don’t you take on too much about it, sir,” said Luke. “You’d ha’ paid iverybody if you could—that’s what I said to Master Tom—I said you’d ha’ paid iverybody if you could.”

Good Luke felt, after the manner of contented hard-working men whose lives have been spent in servitude, that sense of natural fitness in rank which made his master’s downfall a tragedy to him. He was urged, in his slow way, to say something that would express his share in the family sorrow, and these words, which he had used over and over again to Tom when he wanted to decline the full payment of his fifty pounds out of the children’s money, were the most ready to his tongue. They were just the words to lay the most painful hold on his master’s bewildered mind.

“Paid everybody?” he said, with vehement agitation, his face flushing, and his eye lighting up. “Why … what … have they made me a *bankrupt?*”

“O father, dear father!” said Maggie, who thought that terrible word really represented the fact; “bear it well—because we love you—your children will always love you. Tom will pay them all; he says he will, when he’s a man.”

She felt her father beginning to tremble—his voice trembled too, as he said, after a few moments—

“Ay, my little wench, but I shall never live twice o’er.”

“But perhaps you will live to see me pay everybody, father,” said Tom, speaking with a great effort.

“Ah, my lad,” said Mr. Tulliver, shaking his head slowly, “but what’s broke can never be whole again: it ’ud be your doing, not mine.” Then, looking up at him, “You’re only sixteen—it’s an up-hill fight for you—but you mustn’t throw it at your father; the raskills have been too many for him. I’ve given you a good eddication—that’ll start you.”

Something in his throat half-choked the last words; the flush which had alarmed his children because it had so often preceded a recurrence of paralysis, had subsided, and his face looked pale and tremulous. Tom said nothing: he was still struggling against his inclination to rush away. His father remained quiet a minute or two, but his mind did not seem to be wandering again.

“Have they sold me up, then?” he said, more calmly, as if he were possessed simply by the desire to know what had happened.

“Everything is sold, father; but we don’t know all about the mill and the land yet,” said Tom, anxious to ward off any question leading to the fact that Wakem was the purchaser.

“You must not be surprised to see the room look very bare downstairs, father,” said Maggie; “but there’s your chair and the bureau—*they’re* not gone.”

“Let us go—help me down, Luke—I’ll go and see everything,” said Mr. Tulliver, leaning on his stick, and stretching out his other hand towards Luke.

“Ay, sir,” said Luke, as he gave his arm to his master, “you’ll make up your mind to’t a bit better when you’ve seen iverything: you’ll get used to’t. That’s what my mother says about her shortness o’ breath—she says she’s made friends wi’t now, though she fought again’ it sore when it fust come on.”

Maggie ran on before to see that all was right in the dreary parlour, where the fire, dulled by the frosty sunshine, seemed part of the general shabbiness. She turned her father’s chair, and pushed aside the table to make an easy way for him, and then stood with a beating heart to see him enter and look round for the first time. Tom advanced before him, carrying the leg-rest, and stood beside Maggie on the hearth. Of those two young hearts Tom’s suffered the most unmixed pain, for Maggie, with all her keen susceptibility, yet felt as if the sorrow made larger room for her love to flow in, and gave breathing-space to her passionate nature. No true boy feels that: he would rather go and slay the Nemean lion, or perform any round of heroic labours, than endure perpetual appeals to his pity, for evils over which he can make no conquest.

Mr. Tulliver paused just inside the door, resting on Luke, and looking round him at all the bare places, which for him were filled with the shadows of departed objects—the daily companions of his life. His faculties seemed to be renewing their strength from getting a footing on this demonstration of the senses.

“Ah!” he said, slowly, moving towards his chair, “they’ve sold me up….they’ve sold me up.”

Then seating himself, and laying down his stick, while Luke left the room, he looked round again.

“They’ve left the big Bible,” he said. “It’s got everything in—when I was born and married—bring it me, Tom.”

The quarto Bible was laid open before him at the fly-leaf, and while he was reading with slowly-travelling eyes, Mrs. Tulliver

entered the room, but stood in mute surprise to find her husband down already, and with the great Bible before him.

"Ah," he said, looking at a spot where his finger rested, "my mother was Margaret Beaton—she died when she was forty-seven: hers wasn't a long-lived family—we're our mother's children—Gritty and me are—we shall go to our last bed before long."

He seemed to be pausing over the record of his sister's birth and marriage, as if it were suggesting new thoughts to him: then he suddenly looked up at Tom, and said, in a sharp tone of alarm—

"They haven't come upo' Moss for the money as I lent him, have they?"

"No, father," said Tom; "the note was burnt."

Mr. Tulliver turned his eyes on the page again, and presently said —

"Ah … Elizabeth Dodson … it's eighteen year since I married her.…"

"Come next Ladyday," said Mrs. Tulliver, going up to his side and looking at the page.

Her husband fixed his eyes earnestly on her face.

"Poor Bessy," he said, "you was a pretty lass then—everybody said so—and I used to think you kept your good looks rarely. But you're sorely aged … don't you bear me ill-will … I meant to do well by you … we promised one another for better or for worse.…"

"But I never thought it 'ud be so for worse as this," said poor Mrs. Tulliver, with the strange scared look that had come over her of late; "and my poor father gave me away … and to come on so all at once.…"

"O mother," said Maggie, "don't talk in that way."

"No, I know you won't let your poor mother speak … that's been the way all my life … your father never minded what I said … it'ud have been o' no use for me to beg and pray … and it 'ud be no use now, not if I was to go down o' my hands and knees.…"

“Don’t say so, Bessy,” said Mr. Tulliver, whose pride, in these first moments of humiliation, was in abeyance to the sense of some justice in his wife’s reproach. “If there’s anything left as I could do to make you amends, I wouldn’t say you nay.”

“Then we might stay here and get a living, and I might keep among my own sisters … and me been such a good wife to you, and never crossed you from week’s end to week’s end … and they all say so … they say it ’ud be nothing but right … only you’re so turned against Wakem.”

“Mother,” said Tom, severely, “this is not the time to talk about that.”

“Let her be,” said Mr. Tulliver. “Say what you mean, Bessy.”

“Why, now the mill and the land’s all Wakem’s, and he’s got everything in his hands, what’s the use o’ setting your face against him?—when he says you may stay here, and speaks as fair as can be, and says you may manage the business, and have thirty shilling a-week, and a horse to ride about to market? And where have we got to put our heads? We must go into one o’ the cottages in the village … and me and my children brought down to that … and all because you must set your mind against folks till there’s no turning you.”

Mr. Tulliver had sunk back in his chair trembling.

“You may do as you like wi’ me, Bessy,” he said, in a low voice; “I’ve been the bringing of you to poverty … this world’s too many for me … I’m nought but a bankrupt—it’s no use standing up for anything now.”

“Father,” said Tom, “I don’t agree with my mother or my uncles, and I don’t think you ought to submit to be under Wakem. I get a pound a-week now, and you can find something else to do when you get well.”

“Say no more, Tom, say no more: I’ve had enough for this day. Give me a kiss, Bessy, and let us bear one another no ill-will: we shall never be young again.… This world’s been too many for me.”

CHAPTER IX

An Item Added to the Family Register

That first moment of renunciation and submission was followed by days of violent struggle in the miller's mind, as the gradual access of bodily strength brought with it increasing ability to embrace in one view all the conflicting conditions under which he found himself. Feeble limbs easily resign themselves to be tethered, and when we are subdued by sickness it seems possible to us to fulfil pledges which the old vigour comes back and breaks. There were times when poor Tulliver thought the fulfilment of his promise to Bessy was something quite too hard for human nature: he had promised her without knowing what she was going to say—she might as well have asked him to carry a ton weight on his back. But again, there were many feelings arguing on her side, besides the sense that life had been made hard to her by having married him. He saw a possibility, by much pinching, of saving money out of his salary towards paying a second dividend to his creditors, and it would not be easy elsewhere to get a situation such as he could fill. He had led an easy life, ordering much and working little, and had no aptitude for any new business. He must perhaps take to day-labour, and his wife must have help from her sisters—a prospect doubly bitter to him, now they had let all Bessy's precious things be sold, probably because they liked to set her against him, by making her feel that he had brought her to that pass. He listened to their admonitory talk, when they came to urge on him what he was bound to do for poor Bessy's sake, with averted eyes, that every now and then flashed on them furtively when their backs were turned. Nothing but the dread of needing their help could have made it an easier alternative to take their advice.

But the strongest influence of all was the love of the old premises where he had run about when he was a boy, just as Tom had done

after him. The Tullivers had lived on this spot for generations, and he had sat listening on a low stool on winter evenings while his father talked of the old half-timbered mill that had been there before the last great floods which damaged it so that his grandfather pulled it down and built the new one. It was when he got able to walk about and look at all the old objects, that he felt the strain of this clinging affection for the old home as part of his life, part of himself. He couldn't bear to think of himself living on any other spot than this, where he knew the sound of every gate and door, and felt that the shape and colour of every roof and weather-stain and broken hillock was good, because his growing senses had been fed on them. Our instructed vagrancy, which has hardly time to linger by the hedgerows, but runs away early to the tropics, and is at home with palms and banyans,—which is nourished on books of travel, and stretches the theatre of its imagination to the Zambesi,—can hardly get a dim notion of what an old-fashioned man like Tulliver felt for this spot, where all his memories centred, and where life seemed like a familiar smooth-handled tool that the fingers clutch with loving ease. And just now he was living in that freshened memory of the far-off time which comes to us in the passive hours of recovery from sickness.

"Ay, Luke," he said, one afternoon, as he stood looking over the orchard gate, "I remember the day they planted those apple-trees. My father was a huge man for planting—it was like a merrymaking to him to get a cart full o' young trees—and I used to stand i' the cold with him, and follow him about like a dog."

Then he turned round, and, leaning against the gate-post, looked at the opposite buildings.

"The old mill 'ud miss me, I think, Luke. There's a story as when the mill changes hands, the river's angry—I've heard my father say it many a time. There's no telling whether there mayn't be summat *in* the story, for this is a puzzling world, and Old Harry's got a finger in it—it's been too many for me, I know."

"Ay, sir," said Luke, with soothing sympathy, "what wi' the rust on the wheat, an' the firin' o' the ricks an' that, as I've seen i' my

time—things often looks comical: there's the bacon fat wi' our last pig runs away like butter—it leaves nought but a scratchin'."

"It's just as if it was yesterday, now," Mr. Tulliver went on, "when my father began the malting. I remember, the day they finished the malt-house, I thought summat great was to come of it; for we'd a plum-pudding that day and a bit of a feast, and I said to my mother —she was a fine dark-eyed woman, my mother was—the little wench 'ull be as like her as two peas."—Here Mr. Tulliver put his stick between his legs, and took out his snuffbox, for the greater enjoyment of this anecdote, which dropped from him in fragments, as if he every other moment lost narration in vision. "I was a little chap no higher much than my mother's knee—she was sore fond of us children, Gritty and me—and so I said to her, 'Mother,' I said, 'shall we have plum-pudding *every* day because o' the malt-house?' She used to tell me o' that till her dying day. She was but a young woman when she died, my mother was. But it's forty good year since they finished the malt-house, and it isn't many days out of 'em all, as I haven't looked out into the yard there, the first thing in the morning—all weathers, from year's end to year's end. I should go off my head in a new place. I should be like as if I'd lost my way. It's all hard, whichever way I look at it—the harness 'ull gall me—but it 'ud be summat to draw along the old road, instead of a new un."

"Ay, sir," said Luke, "you'd be a deal better here nor in some new place. I can't abide new places mysen: things is allays awk'ard—narrow-wheeled waggins, belike, and the stiles all another sort, an' oat-cake i' some places, tow'rt th' head o' the Floss, there. It's poor work, changing your country-side."

"But I doubt, Luke, they'll be for getting rid o' Ben, and making you do with a lad—and I must help a bit wi' the mill. You'll have a worse place."

"Ne'er mind, sir," said Luke, "I shan't plague mysen. I'n been wi' you twenty year, an' you can't get twenty year wi' whistlin' for 'em, no more nor you can make the trees grow: you mun wait till God A'mighty sends 'em. I can't abide new victual nor new faces, *I* can't —you niver know but what they'll gripe you."

The walk was finished in silence after this, for Luke had disburthened himself of thoughts to an extent that left his conversational resources quite barren, and Mr. Tulliver had relapsed from his recollections into a painful meditation on the choice of hardships before him. Maggie noticed that he was unusually absent that evening at tea; and afterwards he sat leaning forward in his chair, looking at the ground, moving his lips, and shaking his head from time to time. Then he looked hard at Mrs. Tulliver, who was knitting opposite him, then at Maggie, who, as she bent over her sewing, was intensely conscious of some drama going forward in her father's mind. Suddenly he took up the poker and broke the large coal fiercely.

"Dear heart, Mr. Tulliver, what can you be thinking of?" said his wife, looking up in alarm: "it's very wasteful, breaking the coal, and we've got hardly any large coal left, and I don't know where the rest is to come from."

"I don't think you're quite so well to-night, are you, father?" said Maggie; "you seem uneasy."

"Why, how is it Tom doesn't come?" said Mr. Tulliver, impatiently.

"Dear heart! is it time? I must go and get his supper," said Mrs. Tulliver, laying down her knitting, and leaving the room.

"It's nigh upon half-past eight," said Mr. Tulliver. "He'll be here soon. Go, go and get the big Bible, and open it at the beginning, where everything's set down. And get the pen and ink."

Maggie obeyed, wondering: but her father gave no further orders, and only sat listening for Tom's footfall on the gravel, apparently irritated by the wind, which had risen, and was roaring so as to drown all other sounds. There was a strange light in his eyes that rather frightened Maggie: *she* began to wish that Tom would come, too.

"There he is, then," said Mr. Tulliver, in an excited way, when the knock came at last. Maggie went to open the door, but her mother

came out of the kitchen, hurriedly; saying, “Stop a bit, Maggie; I’ll open it.”

Mrs. Tulliver had begun to be a little frightened at her boy, but she was jealous of every office others did for him.

“Your supper’s ready by the kitchen-fire, my boy,” she said, as he took off his hat and coat. “You shall have it by yourself, just as you like, and I won’t speak to you.”

“I think my father wants Tom, mother,” said Maggie; “he must come into the parlour first.”

Tom entered with his usual saddened evening face, but his eyes fell immediately on the open Bible and the inkstand, and he glanced with a look of anxious surprise at his father, who was saying—

“Come, come, you’re late—I want you.”

“Is there anything the matter, father?” said Tom.

“You sit down—all of you,” said Mr. Tulliver, peremptorily. “And, Tom, sit down here; I’ve got something for you to write i’ the Bible.”

They all three sat down, looking at him. He began to speak, slowly, looking first at his wife.

“I’ve made up my mind, Bessy, and I’ll be as good as my word to you. There’ll be the same grave made for us to lie down in, and we mustn’t be bearing one another ill-will. I’ll stop in the old place, and I’ll serve under Wakem—and I’ll serve him like an honest man: there’s no Tulliver but what’s honest, mind that, Tom”— here his voice rose: “they’ll have it to throw up against me as I paid a dividend—but it wasn’t my fault—it was because there’s raskills in the world. They’ve been too many for me, and I must give in. I’ll put my neck in harness—for you’ve a right to say as I’ve brought you into trouble, Bessy—and I’ll serve him as honest as if he was no raskill: I’m an honest man, though I shall never hold my head up no more—I’m a tree as is broke—a tree as is broke.”

He paused, and looked on the ground. Then suddenly raising his head, he said, in a louder yet deeper tone—

“But I won’t forgive him! I know what they say—he never meant me any harm—that’s the way Old Harry props up the raskills—he’s been at the bottom of everything—but he’s a fine gentleman—I know, I know. I shouldn’t ha’ gone to law, they say. But who made it so as there was no arbitratin’, and no justice to be got? It signifies nothing to him—I know that; he’s one o’ them fine gentlemen as get money by doing business for poorer folks, and when he’s made beggars of ’em he’ll give ’em charity. I won’t forgive him! I wish he might be punished with shame till his own son ’ud like to forget him. I wish he may do summat as they’d make him work at the treadmill! But he won’t—he’s too big a raskill to let the law lay hold on him. And you mind this, Tom—you never forgive him, neither, if you mean to be my son. There’ll maybe come a time when you may make him feel—it’ll never come to me—I’n got my head under the yoke. Now write—write it i’ the Bible.”

“O father, what?” said Maggie, sinking down by his knee, pale and trembling. “It’s wicked to curse and bear malice.”

“It isn’t wicked, I tell you,” said her father, fiercely. “It’s wicked as the raskills should prosper—it’s the devil’s doing. Do as I tell you, Tom. Write.”

“What am I to write, father?” said Tom, with gloomy submission.

“Write as your father, Edward Tulliver, took service under John Wakem, the man as had helped to ruin him, because I’d promised my wife to make her what amends I could for her trouble, and because I wanted to die in th’ old place, where I was born and my father was born. Put that i’ the right words—you know how—and then write, as I don’t forgive Wakem, for all that; and for all I’ll serve him honest, I wish evil may befall him. Write that.”

There was a dead silence as Tom’s pen moved along the paper: Mrs. Tulliver looked scared, and Maggie trembled like a leaf.

“Now let me hear what you’ve wrote,” said Mr. Tulliver. Tom read aloud, slowly.

“Now write—write as you’ll remember what Wakem’s done to your father, and you’ll make him and his feel it, if ever the day

comes. And sign your name Thomas Tulliver."

"O no, father, dear father!" said Maggie, almost choked with fear. "You shouldn't make Tom write that."

"Be quiet, Maggie!" said Tom. "I *shall* write it."

BOOK FOURTH

THE VALLEY OF HUMILIATION

CHAPTER I

A Variation of Protestantism Unknown to Bossuet

Journeying down the Rhone on a summer's day, you have perhaps felt the sunshine made dreary by those ruined villages which stud the banks in certain parts of its course, telling how the swift river once rose, like an angry, destroying god, sweeping down the feeble generations whose breath is in their nostrils, and making their dwellings a desolation. Strange contrast, you may have thought, between the effect produced on us by these dismal remnants of commonplace houses, which in their best days were but the sign of a sordid life, belonging in all its details to our own vulgar era; and the effect produced by those ruins on the castled Rhine, which have crumbled and mellowed into such harmony with the green and rocky steeps, that they seem to have a natural fitness, like the mountain-pine: nay, even in the day when they were built they must have had this fitness, as if they had been raised by an earth-born race, who had inherited from their mighty parent a sublime instinct of form. And that was a day of romance! If those robberbarons were somewhat grim and drunken ogres, they had a certain grandeur of the wild beast in them—they were forest boars with tusks, tearing and rending, not the ordinary domestic grunter; they represented the demon forces for ever in collision with beauty, virtue, and the gentle uses of life; they made a fine contrast in the picture with the wandering minstrel, the soft-lipped princess, the pious recluse, and the timid Israelite. That was a time of colour, when the sunlight fell on glancing steel and floating banners; a time of adventure and fierce struggle—nay, of living, religious art and religious enthusiasm; for were not cathedrals built in those days, and did not great emperors leave their Western palaces to die before the infidel strongholds in the sacred East? Therefore it is that these Rhine castles thrill me with a sense of poetry: they belong to the grand historic life of humanity, and raise up for me the vision of an epoch.

But these dead-tinted, hollow-eyed, angular skeletons of villages on the Rhone oppress me with the feeling that human life—very much of it—is a narrow, ugly, grovelling existence, which even calamity does not elevate, but rather tends to exhibit in all its bare vulgarity of conception; and I have a cruel conviction that the lives these ruins are the traces of, were part of a gross sum of obscure vitality, that will be swept into the same oblivion with the generations of ants and beavers.

Perhaps something akin to this oppressive feeling may have weighed upon you in watching this old-fashioned family life on the banks of the Floss, which even sorrow hardly suffices to lift above the level of the tragi-comic. It is a sordid life, you say, this of the Tullivers and Dodsons—irradiated by no sublime principles, no romantic visions, no active, self-renouncing faith—moved by none of those wild, uncontrollable passions which create the dark shadows of misery and crime—without that primitive rough simplicity of wants, that hard submissive ill-paid toil, that childlike spelling-out of what nature has written, which gives its poetry to peasant life. Here, one has conventional worldly notions and habits without instruction and without polish—surely the most prosaic form of human life: proud respectability in a gig of unfashionable build: worldliness without side-dishes. Observing these people narrowly, even when the iron hand of misfortune has shaken them from their unquestioning hold on the world, one sees little trace of religion, still less of a distinctively Christian creed. Their belief in the Unseen, so far as it manifests itself at all, seems to be rather of a pagan kind; their moral notions, though held with strong tenacity, seem to have no standard beyond hereditary custom. You could not live among such people; you are stifled for want of an outlet towards something beautiful, great, or noble; you are irritated with these dull men and women, as a kind of population out of keeping with the earth on which they live—with this rich plain where the great river flows for ever onward, and links the small pulse of the old English town with the beatings of the world's mighty heart. A vigorous superstition, that lashes its gods or lashes its own back,

seems to be more congruous with the mystery of the human lot, than the mental condition of these emmet-like Dodsons and Tullivers.

I share with you this sense of oppressive narrowness; but it is necessary that we should feel it, if we care to understand how it acted on the lives of Tom and Maggie—how it has acted on young natures in many generations, that in the onward tendency of human things have risen above the mental level of the generation before them, to which they have been nevertheless tied by the strongest fibres of their hearts. The suffering, whether of martyr or victim, which belongs to every historical advance of mankind, is represented in this way in every town, and by hundreds of obscure hearths; and we need not shrink from this comparison of small things with great; for does not science tell us that its highest striving is after the ascertainment of a unity which shall bind the smallest things with the greatest? In natural science, I have understood, there is nothing petty to the mind that has a large vision of relations, and to which every single object suggests a vast sum of conditions. It is surely the same with the observation of human life.

Certainly the religious and moral ideas of the Dodsons and Tullivers were of too specific a kind to be arrived at deductively, from the statement that they were part of the Protestant population of Great Britain. Their theory of life had its core of soundness, as all theories must have on which decent and prosperous families have been reared and have flourished; but it had the very slightest tincture of theology. If, in the maiden days of the Dodson sisters, their Bibles opened more easily at some parts than others, it was because of dried tulip-petals, which had been distributed quite impartially, without preference for the historical, devotional, or doctrinal. Their religion was of a simple, semi-pagan kind, but there was no heresy in it—if heresy properly means choice—for they didn't know there was any other religion, except that of chapel-goers, which appeared to run in families, like asthma. How *should* they know? The vicar of their pleasant rural parish was not a controversialist, but a good hand at whist, and one who had a joke

always ready for a blooming female parishioner. The religion of the Dodsons consisted in revering whatever was customary and respectable: it was necessary to be baptised, else one could not be buried in the churchyard, and to take the sacrament before death as a security against more dimly understood perils; but it was of equal necessity to have the proper pall-bearers and well-cured hams at one's funeral, and to leave an unimpeachable will. A Dodson would not be taxed with the omission of anything that was becoming, or that belonged to that eternal fitness of things which was plainly indicated in the practice of the most substantial parishioners, and in the family traditions—such as, obedience to parents, faithfulness to kindred, industry, rigid honesty, thrift, the thorough scouring of wooden and copper utensils, the hoarding of coins likely to disappear from the currency, the production of first-rate commodities for the market, and the general preference for whatever was homemade. The Dodsons were a very proud race, and their pride lay in the utter frustration of all desire to tax them with a breach of traditional duty or propriety. A wholesome pride in many respects, since it identified honour with perfect integrity, thoroughness of work, and faithfulness to admitted rules: and society owes some worthy qualities in many of her members to mothers of the Dodson class, who made their butter and their fromenty well, and would have felt disgraced to make it otherwise. To be honest and poor was never a Dodson motto, still less to seem rich though being poor; rather, the family badge was to be honest and rich; and not only rich, but richer than was supposed. To live respected, and have the proper bearers at your funeral, was an achievement of the ends of existence that would be entirely nullified if, on the reading of your will, you sank in the opinion of your fellow-men, either by turning out to be poorer than they expected, or by leaving your money in a capricious manner, without strict regard to degrees of kin. The right thing must always be done towards kindred. The right thing was to correct them severely, if they were other than a credit to the family, but still not to alienate from them the smallest rightful share in the family shoe-buckles and other property. A conspicuous quality in the Dodson character was

its genuineness: its vices and virtues alike were phases of a proud, honest egoism, which had a hearty dislike to whatever made against its own credit and interest, and would be frankly hard of speech to inconvenient "kin," but would never forsake or ignore them—would not let them want bread, but only require them to eat it with bitter herbs.

The same sort of traditional belief ran in the Tulliver veins, but it was carried in richer blood, having elements of generous imprudence, warm affection, and hot-tempered rashness. Mr. Tulliver's grandfather had been heard to say that he was descended from one Ralph Tulliver, a wonderfully clever fellow, who had ruined himself. It is likely enough that the clever Ralph was a high liver, rode spirited horses, and was very decidedly of his own opinion. On the other hand, nobody had ever heard of a Dodson who had ruined himself: it was not the way of that family.

If such were the views of life on which the Dodsons and Tullivers had been reared in the praiseworthy past of Pitt and high prices, you will infer from what you already know concerning the state of society in St. Ogg's, that there had been no highly modifying influence to act on them in their maturer life. It was still possible, even in that later time of anti-Catholic preaching, for people to hold many pagan ideas, and believe themselves good church-people notwithstanding; so we need hardly feel any surprise at the fact that Mr. Tulliver, though a regular church-goer, recorded his vindictiveness on the fly-leaf of his Bible. It was not that any harm could be said concerning the vicar of that charming rural parish to which Dorlcote Mill belonged: he was a man of excellent family, an irreproachable bachelor, of elegant pursuits,—had taken honours, and held a fellowship. Mr. Tulliver regarded him with dutiful respect, as he did everything else belonging to the church-service; but he considered that church was one thing and common-sense another, and he wanted nobody to tell *him* what common-sense was. Certain seeds which are required to find a nidus for themselves under unfavourable circumstances, have been supplied by nature with an apparatus of hooks, so that they will get a hold on very un-

receptive surfaces. The spiritual seed which had been scattered over Mr. Tulliver had apparently been destitute of any corresponding provision, and had slipped off to the winds again, from a total absence of hooks.

CHAPTER II

The Torn Nest Is Pierced by the Thorns

There is something sustaining in the very agitation that accompanies the first shocks of trouble, just as an acute pain is often a stimulus, and produces an excitement which is transient strength. It is in the slow, changed life that follows—in the time when sorrow has become stale, and has no longer an emotive intensity that counteracts its pain—in the time when day follows day in dull unexpectant sameness, and trial is a dreary routine;—it is then that despair threatens; it is then that the peremptory hunger of the soul is felt, and eye and ear are strained after some unlearned secret of our existence, which shall give to endurance the nature of satisfaction.

This time of utmost need was come to Maggie, with her short span of thirteen years. To the usual precocity of the girl, she added that early experience of struggle, of conflict between the inward impulse and outward fact, which is the lot of every imaginative and passionate nature; and the years since she hammered the nails into her wooden Fetish among the worm-eaten shelves of the attic, had been filled with so eager a life in the triple world of Reality, Books, and Waking Dreams, that Maggie was strangely old for her years in everything except in her entire want of that prudence and self-command which were the qualities that made Tom manly in the midst of his intellectual boyishness. And now her lot was beginning to have a still, sad monotony, which threw her more than ever on her inward self. Her father was able to attend to business again, his affairs were settled, and he was acting as Wakem's manager on the old spot. Tom went to and fro every morning and evening, and became more and more silent in the short intervals at home: what was there to say? One day was like another, and Tom's interest in life, driven back and crushed on every other side, was concentrating

itself into the one channel of ambitious resistance to misfortune. The peculiarities of his father and mother were very irksome to him, now they were laid bare of all the softening accompaniments of an easy prosperous home; for Tom had very clear prosaic eyes, not apt to be dimmed by mists of feeling or imagination. Poor Mrs. Tulliver, it seemed, would never recover her old self—her placid household activity: how could she? The objects among which her mind had moved complacently were all gone—all the little hopes, and schemes, and speculations, all the pleasant little cares about her treasures which had made the world quite comprehensible to her for a quarter of a century, since she had made her first purchase of the sugar-tongs, had been suddenly snatched away from her, and she remained bewildered in this empty life. Why that should have happened to her which had not happened to other women, remained an insoluble question by which she expressed her perpetual ruminating comparison of the past with the present. It was piteous to see the comely woman getting thinner and more worn under a bodily as well as mental restlessness, which made her often wander about the empty house after her work was done, until Maggie, becoming alarmed about her, would seek her, and bring her down by telling her how it vexed Tom that she was injuring her health by never sitting down and resting herself. Yet amidst this helpless imbecility there was a touching trait of humble self-devoting maternity, which made Maggie feel tenderly towards her poor mother amidst all the little wearing griefs caused by her mental feebleness. She would let Maggie do none of the work that was heaviest and most soiling to the hands, and was quite peevish when Maggie attempted to relieve her from her grate-brushing and scouring: “Let it alone, my dear; your hands ’ull get as hard as hard,” she would say: “it’s your mother’s place to do that. I can’t do the sewing—my eyes fail me.” And she would still brush and carefully tend Maggie’s hair, which she had become reconciled to, in spite of its refusal to curl, now it was so long and massy. Maggie was not her pet child, and, in general, would have been much better if she had been quite different; yet the womanly heart, so bruised in its small personal desires, found a future to rest on in the life of this

young thing, and the mother pleased herself with wearing out her own hands to save the hands that had so much more life in them.

But the constant presence of her mother's regretful bewilderment was less painful to Maggie than that of her father's sullen incommunicative depression. As long as the paralysis was upon him, and it seemed as if he might always be in a childlike condition of dependence—as long as he was still only half-awakened to his trouble, Maggie had felt the strong tide of pitying love almost as an inspiration, a new power, that would make the most difficult life easy for his sake; but now, instead of childlike dependence there had come a taciturn hard concentration of purpose, in strange contrast with his old vehement communicativeness and high spirit; and this lasted from day to day, and from week to week, the dull eye never brightening with any eagerness or any joy. It is something cruelly incomprehensible to youthful natures, this sombre sameness in middle-aged and elderly people, whose life has resulted in disappointment and discontent, to whose faces a smile becomes so strange that the sad lines all about the lips and brow seem to take no notice of it, and it hurries away again for want of a welcome. "Why will they not kindle up and be glad sometimes?" thinks young elasticity. "It would be so easy if they only liked to do it." And these leaden clouds that never part are apt to create impatience even in the filial affection that streams forth in nothing but tenderness and pity in the time of more obvious affliction.

Mr. Tulliver lingered nowhere away from home: he hurried away from market, he refused all invitations to stay and chat, as in old times, in the houses where he called on business. He could not be reconciled with his lot: there was no attitude in which his pride did not feel its bruises; and in all behaviour towards him, whether kind or cold, he detected an allusion to the change in his circumstances. Even the days on which Wakem came to ride round the land and inquire into the business, were not so black to him as those market-days on which he had met several creditors who had accepted a composition from him. To save something towards the repayment of those creditors, was the object towards which he was now bending

all his thoughts and efforts; and under the influence of this all-compelling demand of his nature, the somewhat profuse man, who hated to be stinted or to stint any one else in his own house, was gradually metamorphosed into the keen-eyed grudger of morsels. Mrs. Tulliver could not economise enough to satisfy him, in their food and firing; and he would eat nothing himself but what was of the coarsest quality. Tom, though depressed and strongly repelled by his father's sullenness, and the dreariness of home, entered thoroughly into his father's feelings about paying the creditors; and the poor lad brought his first quarter's money, with a delicious sense of achievement, and gave it to his father to put into the tin box which held the savings. The little store of sovereigns in the tin box seemed to be the only sight that brought a faint beam of pleasure into the miller's eyes—faint and transient, for it was soon dispelled by the thought that the time would be lone—perhaps longer than his life—before the narrow savings could remove the hateful incubus of debt. A deficit of more than five hundred pounds, with the accumulating interest, seemed a deep pit to fill with the savings from thirty shillings a-week, even when Tom's probable savings were to be added. On this one point there was entire community of feeling in the four widely differing beings who sat round the dying fire of sticks, which made a cheap warmth for them on the verge of bedtime. Mrs. Tulliver carried the proud integrity of the Dodsons in her blood, and had been brought up to think that to wrong people of their money, which was another phrase for debt, was a sort of moral pillory: it would have been wickedness, to her mind, to have run counter to her husband's desire to "do the right thing," and retrieve his name. She had a confused dreamy notion that, if the creditors were all paid, her plate and linen ought to come back to her; but she had an inbred perception that while people owed money they were unable to pay, they couldn't rightly call anything their own. She murmured a little that Mr. Tulliver so peremptorily refused to receive anything in repayment from Mr. and Mrs. Moss; but to all his requirements of household economy she was submissive to the point of denying herself the cheapest indulgences of mere flavour:

her only rebellion was to smuggle into the kitchen something that would make rather a better supper than usual for Tom.

These narrow notions about debt, held by the old-fashioned Tullivers, may perhaps excite a smile on the faces of many readers in these days of wide commercial views and wide philosophy, according to which everything rights itself without any trouble of ours: the fact that my tradesman is out of pocket by me, is to be looked at through the serene certainty that somebody else's tradesman is in pocket by somebody else; and since there must be bad debts in the world, why, it is mere egoism not to like that we in particular should make them instead of our fellow-citizens. I am telling the history of very simple people, who had never had any illuminating doubts as to personal integrity and honour.

Under all this grim melancholy and narrowing concentration of desire, Mr. Tulliver retained the feeling towards his "little wench" which made her presence a need to him, though it would not suffice to cheer him. She was still the desire of his eyes; but the sweet spring of fatherly love was now mingled with bitterness, like everything else. When Maggie laid down her work at night, it was her habit to get a low stool and sit by her father's knee, leaning her cheek against it. How she wished he would stroke her head, or give some sign that he was soothed by the sense that he had a daughter who loved him! But now she got no answer to her little caresses, either from her father or from Tom—the two idols of her life. Tom was weary and abstracted in the short intervals when he was at home, and her father was bitterly preoccupied with the thought that the girl was growing up—was shooting up into a woman; and how was she to do well in life? She had a poor chance for marrying, down in the world as they were. And he hated the thought of her marrying poorly, as her aunt Gritty had done: *that* would be a thing to make him turn in his grave—the little wench so pulled down by children and toil, as her aunt Moss was. When uncultured minds, confined to a narrow range of personal experience, are under the pressure of continued misfortune, their inward life is apt to become a perpetually repeated round of sad and bitter thoughts: the same

words, the same scenes are revolved over and over again, the same mood accompanies them—the end of the year finds them as much what they were at the beginning as if they were machines set to a recurrent series of movements.

The sameness of the days was broken by few visitors. Uncles and aunts paid only short visits now: of course, they could not stay to meals, and the constraint caused by Mr. Tulliver's savage silence, which seemed to add to the hollow resonance of the bare uncarpeted room when the aunts were talking, heightened the unpleasantness of these family visits on all sides, and tended to make them rare. As for other acquaintances—there is a chill air surrounding those who are down in the world, and people are glad to get away from them, as from a cold room: human beings, mere men and women, without furniture, without anything to offer you, who have ceased to count as anybody, present an embarrassing negation of reasons for wishing to see them, or of subjects on which to converse with them. At that distant day, there was a dreary isolation in the civilised Christian society of these realms for families that had dropped below their original level, unless they belonged to a sectarian church, which gets some warmth of brotherhood by walling in the sacred fire.

CHAPTER III

A Voice from the Past

One afternoon, when the chestnuts were coming into flower, Maggie had brought her chair outside the front door, and was seated there with a book on her knees. Her dark eyes had wandered from the book, but they did not seem to be enjoying the sunshine which pierced the screen of jasmine on the projecting porch at her right, and threw leafy shadows on her pale round cheek; they seemed rather to be searching for something that was not disclosed by the sunshine. It had been a more miserable day than usual: her father, after a visit of Wakem's, had had a paroxysm of rage, in which for some trifling fault he had beaten the boy who served in the mill. Once before, since his illness, he had had a similar paroxysm, in which he had beaten his horse, and the scene had left a lasting terror in Maggie's mind. The thought had risen, that some time or other he might beat her mother if she happened to speak in her feeble way at the wrong moment. The keenest of all dread with her was, lest her father should add to his present misfortune the wretchedness of doing something irretrievably disgraceful. The battered school-book of Tom's which she held on her knees could give her no fortitude under the pressure of that dread, and again and again her eyes had filled with tears, as they wandered vaguely, seeing neither the chestnut-trees nor the distant horizon, but only future scenes of home-sorrow.

Suddenly she was roused by the sound of the opening gate and of footsteps on the gravel. It was not Tom who was entering, but a man in a seal-skin cap and a blue plush waistcoat, carrying a pack on his back, and followed closely by a bull-terrier of brindled coat and defiant aspect.

"O Bob, it's you!" said Maggie, starting up with a smile of pleased recognition, for there had been no abundance of kind acts to efface

the recollection of Bob's generosity; "I'm so glad to see you."

"Thank you, Miss," said Bob, lifting his cap and showing a delighted face, but immediately relieving himself of some accompanying embarrassment by looking down at his dog, and saying in a tone of disgust, "Get out wi' you, you thunderin' sawney!"

"My brother is not at home yet, Bob," said Maggie; "he is always at St. Ogg's in the daytime."

"Well, Miss," said Bob, "I should be glad to see Mr. Tom—but that isn't just what I'm come for—look here!"

Bob was in the act of depositing his pack on the door-step, and with it a row of small books fastened together with string. Apparently, however, they were not the object to which he wished to call Maggie's attention, but rather something which he had carried under his arm, wrapped in a red handkerchief.

"See here!" he said again, laying the red parcel on the others and unfolding it; "you won't think I'm a-makin' too free, Miss, I hope, but I lighted on these books, and I thought they might make up to you a bit for them as you've lost; for I heared you speak o' picturs—an' as for picturs, *look* here!"

The opening of the red handkerchief had disclosed a superannuated "Keepsake" and six or seven numbers of a "Portrait Gallery," in royal octavo; and the emphatic request to look referred to a portrait of George the Fourth in all the majesty of his depressed cranium and voluminous neckcloth.

"There's all sorts o' genelmen here," Bob went on, turning over the leaves with some excitement, "wi' all sorts o' noses—an' some bald an' some wi' wigs—Parlament genelmen, I reckon. An' here," he added, opening the "Keepsake," *"here's* ladies for you, some wi' curly hair and some wi' smooth, an' some a-smiling wi' their heads o' one side, an' some as if they was goin' to cry—look here—a-sittin' on the ground out o' door, dressed like the ladies I'n seen get out o' the carriages at the balls in th' Old Hall there. My eyes, I wonder what the chaps wear as go a-courtin' em! I sot up till the clock was

gone twelve last night a-lookin' at 'em—I did—till they stared at me out o' the picturs as if they'd know when I spoke to 'em. But, lors! I shouldn't know what to say to 'em. They'll be more fittin' company for you, Miss; and the man at the book-stall, he said they banged iverything for picturs—he said they was a fust-rate article."

"And you've bought them for me, Bob?" said Maggie, deeply touched by this simple kindness. "How very, very good of you! But I'm afraid you gave a great deal of money for them."

"Not me!" said Bob. "I'd ha' gev three times the money if they'll make up to you a bit for them as was sold away from you, Miss. For I'n niver forgot how you looked when you fretted about the books bein' gone—it's stuck by me as if it was a pictur hingin' before me. An' when I see'd the book open upo' the stall, wi' the lady lookin' out of it wi' eyes a bit like your'n when you was frettin'—you'll excuse my takin' the liberty, Miss—I thought I'd make free to buy it for you, an' then I bought the books full o' genelmen to match—an' then"—here Bob took up the small stringed packet of books—"I thought you might like a bit more print as well as the picturs, an' I got these for a say-so—they're cram-full o' print, an' I thought they'd do no harm comin' along wi' these bettermost books. An' I hope you won't say me nay, an' tell me as you won't have 'em, like Mr. Tom did wi' the suvreigns."

"No, indeed, Bob," said Maggie, "I'm very thankful to you for thinking of me, and being so good to me and Tom. I don't think any one ever did such a kind thing for me before. I haven't many friends who care for me."

"Hev a dog, Miss!—they're better friends nor any Christian," said Bob, laying down his pack again, which he had taken up with the intention of hurrying away; for he felt considerable shyness in talking to a young lass like Maggie, though, as he usually said of himself, "his tongue overrun him" when he began to speak. "I can't give you Mumps, 'cause he'd break his heart to go away from me—eh, Mumps, what do you say, you riff-raff?"—(Mumps declined to express himself more diffusely than by a single affirmative movement of his tail.) "But I'd get you a pup, Miss, an' welcome."

“No, thank you, Bob. We have a yard dog, and I mayn’t keep a dog of my own.”

“Eh, that’s a pity: else there’s a pup—if you didn’t mind about it not being thoroughbred: its mother acts in the Punch show—an uncommon sensable bitch—she means more sense wi’ her bark nor half the chaps can put into their talk from breakfast to sundown. There’s one chap carries pots,—a poor low trade as any on the road,—he says, ‘Why, Toby’s nought but a mongrel—there’s nought to look at in her.’ But I says to him, ‘Why, what are you yoursen but a mongrel? There wasn’t much pickin’ o’ *your* feyther an’ mother, to look at you.’ Not but what I like a bit o’ breed myself, but I can’t abide to see one cur grinnin’ at another. I wish you good-evenin’, Miss,” added Bob, abruptly taking up his pack again, under the consciousness that his tongue was acting in an undisciplined manner.

“Won’t you come in the evening some time, and see my brother, Bob?” said Maggie.

“Yes, Miss, thank you—another time. You’ll give my duty to him, if you please. Eh, he’s a fine growed chap, Mr. Tom is; he took to growin’ i’ the legs, an’ *I* didn’t.”

The pack was down again, now—the hook of the stick having somehow gone wrong.

“You don’t call Mumps a cur, I suppose?” said Maggie, divining that any interest she showed in Mumps would be gratifying to his master.

“No, Miss, a fine way off that,” said Bob, with a pitying smile; “Mumps is as fine a cross as you’ll see anywhere along the Floss, an’ I’n been up it wi’ the barge times enow. Why, the gentry stops to look at him; but you won’t catch Mumps a-looking at the gentry much—he minds his own business, he does.”

The expression of Mumps’s face, which seemed to be tolerating the superfluous existence of objects in general, was strongly confirmatory of this high praise.

“He looks dreadfully surly,” said Maggie. “Would he let me pat him?”

“Ay, that would he, and thank you. He knows his company, Mumps does. He isn’t a dog as ‘ull be caught wi’ gingerbread: he’d smell a thief a good deal stronger nor the gingerbread—he would. Lors, I talk to him by th’ hour together, when I’m walking i’ lone places, and if I’n done a bit o’ mischief, I allays tell him. I’n got no secrets but what Mumps knows ’em. He knows about my big thumb, he does.”

“Your big thumb—what’s that, Bob?” said Maggie.

“That’s what it is, Miss,” said Bob, quickly, exhibiting a singularly broad specimen of that difference between the man and the monkey. “It tells i’ measuring out the flannel, you see. I carry flannel, ’cause it’s light for my pack, an’ it’s dear stuff, you see, so a big thumb tells. I clap my thumb at the end o’ the yard and cut o’ the hither side of it, and the old women aren’t up to’t.”

“But, Bob,” said Maggie, looking serious, “that’s cheating: I don’t like to hear you say that.”

“Don’t you, Miss?” said Bob, regretfully. “Then I’m sorry I said it. But I’m so used to talking to Mumps, an’ he doesn’t mind a bit o’ cheating, when it’s them skinflint women, as haggle an’ haggle, an’ ’ud like to get their flannel for nothing, an’ ’ud niver ask theirselves how I got my dinner out on’t. I niver cheat anybody as doesn’t want to cheat me, Miss—lors, I’m a honest chap, I am; only I must hev a bit o’ sport, an’ now I don’t go wi’ the ferrets, I’n got no varmint to come over but them haggling women. I wish you good-evening, Miss.”

“Good-bye, Bob. Thank you very much for bringing me the books. And come again to see Tom.”

“Yes, Miss,” said Bob, moving on a few steps; then turning half round, he said, “I’ll leave off that trick wi’ my big thumb, if you don’t think well on me for it, Miss—but it ’ud be a pity, it would. I couldn’t find another trick so good—an’ what ’ud be the use o’ havin’ a big thumb? It might as well ha’ been narrow.”

Maggie, thus exalted into Bob's directing Madonna, laughed in spite of herself; at which her worshipper's blue eyes twinkled too, and under these favouring auspices he touched his cap and walked away.

The days of chivalry are not gone, notwithstanding Burke's grand dirge over them: they live still in that far-off worship paid by many a youth and man to the woman of whom he never dreams that he shall touch so much as her little finger or the hem of her robe. Bob, with the pack on his back, had as respectful an adoration for this dark-eyed maiden as if he had been a knight in armour calling aloud on her name as he pricked on to the fight.

That gleam of merriment soon died away from Maggie's face, and perhaps only made the returning gloom deeper by contrast. She was too dispirited even to like answering questions about Bob's present of books, and she carried them away to her bedroom, laying them down there and seating herself on her one stool, without caring to look at them just yet. She leaned her cheek against the window-frame, and thought that the light-hearted Bob had a lot much happier than hers.

Maggie's sense of loneliness, and utter privation of joy, had deepened with the brightness of advancing spring. All the favourite out-door nooks about home, which seemed to have done their part with her parents in nurturing and cherishing her, were now mixed up with the home-sadness, and gathered no smile from the sunshine. Every affection, every delight the poor child had had, was like an aching nerve to her. There was no music for her any more—no piano, no harmonised voices, no delicious stringed instruments, with their passionate cries of imprisoned spirits sending a strange vibration through her frame. And of all her school-life there was nothing left her now but her little collection of school-books, which she turned over with a sickening sense that she knew them all, and they were all barren of comfort. Even at school she had often wished for books with *more* in them: everything she learned there seemed like the ends of long threads that snapped immediately. And now—without the indirect charm of school-emulation—Télémaque

was mere bran; so were the hard dry questions on Christian Doctrine: there was no flavour in them—no strength. Sometimes Maggie thought she could have been contented with absorbing fancies; if she could have had all Scott's novels and all Byron's poems!—then, perhaps, she might have found happiness enough to dull her sensibility to her actual daily life. And yet … they were hardly what she wanted. She could make dreamworlds of her own—but no dream-world would satisfy her now. She wanted some explanation of this hard, real life: the unhappy-looking father, seated at the dull breakfast-table; the childish, bewildered mother; the little sordid tasks that filled the hours, or the more oppressive emptiness of weary, joyless leisure; the need of some tender, demonstrative love; the cruel sense that Tom didn't mind what she thought or felt, and that they were no longer playfellows together; the privation of all pleasant things that had come to *her* more than to others: she wanted some key that would enable her to understand, and, in understanding, endure, the heavy weight that had fallen on her young heart. If she had been taught "real learning and wisdom, such as great men knew," she thought she should have held the secrets of life; if she had only books, that she might learn for herself what wise men knew! Saints and martyrs had never interested Maggie so much as sages and poets. She knew little of saints and martyrs, and had gathered, as a general result of her teaching, that they were a temporary provision against the spread of Catholicism, and had all died at Smithfield.

In one of these meditations it occurred to her that she had forgotten Tom's school-books, which had been sent home in his trunk. But she found the stock unaccountably shrunk down to the few old ones which had been well thumbed—the Latin Dictionary and Grammar, a Delectus, a torn Eutropius, the well-worn Virgil, Aldrich's Logic, and the exasperating Euclid. Still, Latin, Euclid, and Logic would surely be a considerable step in masculine wisdom—in that knowledge which made men contented, and even glad to live. Not that the yearning for effectual wisdom was quite unmixed: a certain mirage would now and then rise on the desert of the future,

in which she seemed to see herself honoured for her surprising attainments. And so the poor child, with her soul's hunger and her illusions of self-flattery, began to nibble at this thick-rinded fruit of the tree of knowledge, filling her vacant hours with Latin, geometry, and the forms of the syllogism, and feeling a gleam of triumph now and then that her understanding was quite equal to these peculiarly masculine studies. For a week or two she went on resolutely enough, though with an occasional sinking of heart, as if she had set out toward the Promised Land alone, and found it a thirsty, trackless, uncertain journey. In the severity of her early resolution, she would take Aldrich out into the fields, and then look off her book towards the sky, where the lark was twinkling, or to the reeds and bushes by the river, from which the waterfowl rustled forth on its anxious, awkward flight—with a startled sense that the relation between Aldrich and this living world was extremely remote for her. The discouragement deepened as the days went on, and the eager heart gained faster and faster on the patient mind. Somehow, when she sat at the window with her book, her eyes *would* fix themselves blankly on the out-door sunshine; then they would fill with tears, and sometimes, if her mother was not in the room, the studies would all end in sobbing. She rebelled against her lot, she fainted under its loneliness, and fits even of anger and hatred towards her father and mother, who were so unlike what she would have them to be—towards Tom, who checked her, and met her thought or feeling always by some thwarting difference—would flow out over her affections and conscience like a lava stream, and frighten her with a sense that it was not difficult for her to become a demon. Then her brain would be busy with wild romances of a flight from home in search of something less sordid and dreary: she would go to some great man—Walter Scott, perhaps—and tell him how wretched and how clever she was, and he would surely do something for her. But, in the middle of her vision, her father would perhaps enter the room for the evening, and, surprised that she sat still without noticing him, would say, complainingly, "Come, am I to fetch my slippers myself?" The voice pierced through Maggie like a sword:

there was another sadness besides her own, and she had been thinking of turning her back on it and forsaking it.

This afternoon, the sight of Bob's cheerful freckled face had given her discontent a new direction. She thought it was part of the hardship of her life that there was laid upon her the burthen of larger wants than others seemed to feel—that she had to endure this wide hopeless yearning for that something, whatever it was, that was greatest and best on this earth. She wished she could have been like Bob, with his easily satisfied ignorance, or like Tom, who had something to do on which he could fix his mind with a steady purpose, and disregard everything else. Poor child! as she leaned her head against the window-frame, with her hands clasped tighter and tighter, and her foot beating the ground, she was as lonely in her trouble as if she had been the only girl in the civilised world of that day who had come out of her school-life with a soul untrained for inevitable struggles—with no other part of her inherited share in the hard-won treasures of thought, which generations of painful toil have laid up for the race of men, than shreds and patches of feeble literature and false history—with much futile information about Saxon and other kings of doubtful example—but unhappily quite without that knowledge of the irreversible laws within and without her, which, governing the habits, becomes morality, and, developing the feelings of submission and dependence, becomes religion:—as lonely in her trouble as if every other girl besides herself had been cherished and watched over by elder minds, not forgetful of their own early time, when need was keen and impulse strong.

At last Maggie's eyes glanced down on the books that lay on the window-shelf, and she half forsook her reverie to turn over listlessly the leaves of the "Portrait Gallery," but she soon pushed this aside to examine the little row of books tied together with string. "Beauties of the Spectator," "Rasselas," "Economy of Human Life," "Gregory's Letters,"—she knew the sort of matter that was inside all these: the "Christian Year"—that seemed to be a hymn-book, and she laid it down again; but *Thomas à Kempis?*—the name had come across her in her reading, and she felt the satisfaction, which every

one knows, of getting some ideas to attach to a name that strays solitary in the memory., , , , , She took up the little, old, clumsy book with some curiosity: it had the corners turned down in many places, and some hand, now for ever quiet, had made at certain passages strong pen-and-ink marks, long since browned by time. Maggie turned from leaf to leaf, and read where the quiet hand pointed.… “Know that the love of thyself doth hurt thee more than anything in the world.… If thou seekest this or that, and wouldst be here or there to enjoy thy own will and pleasure, thou shalt never be quiet nor free from care: for in everything somewhat will be wanting, and in every place there will be some that will cross thee.… Both above and below, which way soever thou dost turn thee, everywhere thou shalt find the Cross: and everywhere of necessity thou must have patience, if thou wilt have inward peace, and enjoy an everlasting crown.… If thou desire to mount unto this height, thou must set out courageously, and lay the axe to the root, that thou mayst pluck up and destroy that hidden inordinate inclination to thyself, and unto all private and earthly good. On this sin, that a man inordinately loveth himself, almost all dependeth, whatsoever is thoroughly to be overcome; which evil being once overcome and subdued, there will presently ensue great peace and tranquillity.… It is but little thou sufferest in comparison of them that have suffered so much, were so strongly tempted, so grievously afflicted, so many ways tried and exercised. Thou oughtest therefore to call to mind the more heavy sufferings of others, that thou mayest the easier bear thy little adversities. And if they seem not little unto thee, beware lest thy impatience be the cause thereof.… Blessed are those ears that receive the whispers of the divine voice, and listen not to the whisperings of the world. Blessed are those ears which hearken not unto the voice which soundeth outwardly, but unto the Truth, which teacheth inwardly.…”

A strange thrill of awe passed through Maggie while she read, as if she had been wakened in the night by a strain of solemn music, telling of beings whose souls had been astir while hers was in stupor. She went on from one brown mark to another, where the

quiet hand seemed to point, hardly conscious that she was reading —seeming rather to listen while a low voice said—

"Why dost thou here gaze about, since this is not the place of thy rest? In heaven ought to be thy dwelling, and all earthly things are to be looked on as they forward thy journey thither. All things pass away, and thou together with them. Beware thou cleave not unto them, lest thou be entangled and perish.… If a man should give all his substance, yet it is as nothing. And if he should do great penances, yet are they but little. And if he should attain to all knowledge, he is yet far off. And if he should be of great virtue, and very fervent devotion, yet is there much wanting; to wit, one thing, which is most necessary for him. What is that? That having left all, be leave himself, and go wholly out of himself, and retain nothing of self-love.… I have often said unto thee, and now again I say the same, Forsake thyself, resign thyself, and thou shalt enjoy much inward peace.… Then shall all vain imaginations, evil perturbations, and superfluous cares fly away; then shall immoderate fear leave thee, and inordinate love shall die."

Maggie drew a long breath and pushed her heavy hair back, as if to see a sudden vision more clearly. Here, then, was a secret of life that would enable her to renounce all other secrets—here was a sublime height to be reached without the help of outward things—here was insight, and strength, and conquest, to be won by means entirely within her own soul, where a supreme Teacher was waiting to be heard. It flashed through her like the suddenly apprehended solution of a problem, that all the miseries of her young life had come from fixing her heart on her own pleasure, as if that were the central necessity of the universe; and for the first time she saw the possibility of shifting the position from which she looked at the gratification of her own desires—of taking her stand out of herself, and looking at her own life as an insignificant part of a divinely-guided whole. She read on and on in the old book, devouring eagerly the dialogues with the invisible Teacher, the pattern of sorrow, the source of all strength; returning to it after she had been called away, and reading till the sun went down behind the willows.

With all the hurry of an imagination that could never rest in the present, she sat in the deepening twilight forming plans of self-humiliation and entire devotedness; and, in the ardour of first discovery, renunciation seemed to her the entrance into that satisfaction which she had so long been craving in vain. She had not perceived—how could she until she had lived longer?—the inmost truth of the old monk's outpourings, that renunciation remains sorrow, though a sorrow borne willingly. Maggie was still panting for happiness, and was in ecstasy because she had found the key to it. She knew nothing of doctrines and systems—of mysticism or quietism; but this voice out of the far-off middle ages was the direct communication of a human soul's belief and experience, and came to Maggie as an unquestioned message.

I suppose that is the reason why the small old-fashioned book, for which you need only pay sixpence at a book-stall, works miracles to this day, turning bitter waters into sweetness: while expensive sermons and treatises, newly issued, leave all things as they were before. It was written down by a hand that waited for the heart's prompting; it is the chronicle of a solitary, hidden anguish, struggle, trust and triumph—not written on velvet cushions to teach endurance to those who are treading with bleeding feet on the stones. And so it remains to all time a lasting record of human needs and human consolations: the voice of a brother who, ages ago, felt and suffered and renounced—in the cloister, perhaps, with serge gown and tonsured head, with much chanting and long fasts, and with a fashion of speech different from ours—but under the same silent far-off heavens, and with the same passionate desires, the same strivings, the same failures, the same weariness.

In writing the history of unfashionable families, one is apt to fall into a tone of emphasis which is very far from being the tone of good society, where principles and beliefs are not only of an extremely moderate kind, but are always presupposed, no subjects being eligible but such as can be touched with a light and graceful irony. But then, good society has its claret and its velvet-carpets, its dinner-engagements six weeks deep, its opera and its faëry

ballrooms; rides off its ennui on thoroughbred horses, lounges at the club, has to keep clear of crinoline vortices, gets its science done by Faraday, and its religion by the superior clergy who are to be met in the best houses: how should it have time or need for belief and emphasis? But good society, floated on gossamer wings of light irony, is of very expensive production; requiring nothing less than a wide and arduous national life condensed in unfragrant deafening factories, cramping itself in mines, sweating at furnaces, grinding, hammering, weaving under more or less oppression of carbonic acid —or else, spread over sheepwalks, and scattered in lonely houses and huts on the clayey or chalky corn-lands, where the rainy days look dreary. This wide national life is based entirely on emphasis— the emphasis of want, which urges it into all the activities necessary for the maintenance of good society and light irony: it spends its heavy years often in a chill, uncarpeted fashion, amidst family discord unsoftened by long corridors. Under such circumstances, there are many among its myriads of souls who have absolutely needed an emphatic belief: life in this unpleasurable shape demanding some solution even to unspeculative minds; just as you inquire into the stuffing of your couch when anything galls you there, whereas eider-down and perfect French springs excite no question. Some have an emphatic belief in alcohol, and seek their *ekstasis* or outside standing-ground in gin; but the rest require something that good society calls “enthusiasm,” something that will present motives in an entire absence of high prizes, something that will give patience and feed human love when the limbs ache with weariness, and human looks are hard upon us—something, clearly, that lies outside personal desires, that includes resignation for ourselves and active love for what is not ourselves. Now and then, that sort of enthusiasm finds a far-echoing voice that comes from an experience springing out of the deepest need. And it was by being brought within the long lingering vibrations of such a voice that Maggie, with her girl’s face and unnoted sorrows, found an effort and a hope that helped her through years of loneliness, making out a faith for herself without the aid of established authorities and appointed guides—for they were not at hand, and her need was

pressing. From what you know of her, you will not be surprised that she threw some exaggeration and willfulness, some pride and impetuosity, even into her self-renunciation: her own life was still a drama for her, in which she demanded of herself that her part should be played with intensity. And so it came to pass that she often lost the spirit of humility by being excessive in the outward act; she often strove after too high a flight, and came down with her poor little half-fledged wings dabbled in the mud. For example, she not only determined to work at plain sewing, that she might contribute something towards the fund in the tin box, but she went, in the first instance, in her zeal of self-mortification, to ask for it at a linenshop in St. Ogg's, instead of getting it in a more quiet and indirect way; and could see nothing but what was entirely wrong and unkind, nay, persecuting, in Tom's reproof of her for this unnecessary act. "I don't like *my* sister to do such things," said Tom; *"I'll* take care that the debts are paid, without your lowering yourself in that way." Surely there was some tenderness and bravery mingled with the worldliness and self-assertion of that little speech; but Maggie held it as dross, overlooking the grains of gold, and took Tom's rebuke as one of her outward crosses. Tom was very hard to her, she used to think, in her long night-watchings—to her who had always loved him so; and then she strove to be contented with that hardness, and to require nothing. That is the path we all like when we set out on our abandonment of egoism—the path of martyrdom and endurance, where the palm-branches grow, rather than the steep highway of tolerance, just allowance, and self-blame, where there are no leafy honours to be gathered and worn.

The old books, Virgil, Euclid, and Aldrich—that wrinkled fruit of the tree of knowledge—had been all laid by; for Maggie had turned her back on the vain ambition to share the thoughts of the wise. In her first ardour she flung away the books with a sort of triumph that she had risen above the need of them; and if they had been her own, she would have burned them, believing that she would never repent. She read so eagerly and constantly in her three books, the Bible, Thomas à Kempis, and the "Christian Year" (no longer

rejected as a “hymn-book”), that they filled her mind with a continual stream of rhythmic memories; and she was too ardently learning to see all nature and life in the light of her new faith, to need any other material for her mind to work on, as she sat with her well-plied needle, making shirts and other complicated stitchings, falsely called “plain”—by no means plain to Maggie, since wristband and sleeve and the like had a capability of being sewed in wrong side outwards in moments of mental wandering.

Hanging diligently over her sewing, Maggie was a sight any one might have been pleased to look at. That new inward life of hers, notwithstanding some volcanic upheavings of imprisoned passions, yet shone out in her face with a tender soft light that mingled itself as added loveliness with the gradually enriched colour and outline of her blossoming youth. Her mother felt the change in her with a sort of puzzled wonder that Maggie should be “growing up so good;” it was amazing that this once “contrairy” child was become so submissive, so backward to assert her own will. Maggie used to look up from her work and find her mother’s eyes fixed upon her: they were watching and waiting for the large young glance, as if her elder frame got some needful warmth from it. The mother was getting fond of her tall, brown girl, the only bit of furniture now on which she could bestow her anxiety and pride; and Maggie, in spite of her own ascetic wish to have no personal adornment, was obliged to give way to her mother about her hair, and submit to have the abundant black locks plaited into a coronet on the summit of her head, after the pitiable fashion of those antiquated times.

“Let your mother have that bit o’ pleasure, my dear,” said Mrs. Tulliver; “I’d trouble enough with your hair once.”

So Maggie, glad of anything that would soothe her mother, and cheer their long day together, consented to the vain decoration, and showed a queenly head above her old frocks—steadily refusing, however, to look at herself in the glass. Mrs. Tulliver liked to call the father’s attention to Maggie’s hair and other unexpected virtues, but he had a brusque reply to give.

“I knew well enough what she’d be, before now—it’s nothing new to me. But it’s a pity she isn’t made o’ commoner stuff—she’ll be thrown away, I doubt: there’ll be nobody to marry her as is fit for her.”

And Maggie’s graces of mind and body fed his gloom. He sat patiently enough while she read him a chapter, or said something timidly when they were alone together about trouble being turned into a blessing. He took it all as part of his daughter’s goodness, which made his misfortunes the sadder to him because they damaged her chance in life. In a mind charged with an eager purpose and an unsatisfied vindictiveness, there is no room for new feelings: Mr. Tulliver did not want spiritual consolation—he wanted to shake off the degradation of debt, and to have his revenge.

BOOK FIFTH

WHEAT AND TARES

CHAPTER I

In the Red Deeps

The family sitting-room was a long room with a window at each end; one looking towards the croft and along the Ripple to the banks of the Floss, the other into the mill-yard. Maggie was sitting with her work against the latter window when she saw Mr. Wakem entering the yard, as usual, on his fine black horse; but not alone, as usual. Some one was with him—a figure in a cloak, on a handsome pony. Maggie had hardly time to feel that it was Philip come back, before they were in front of the window, and he was raising his hat to her; while his father, catching the movement by a side-glance, looked sharply round at them both.

Maggie hurried away from the window and carried her work upstairs; for Mr. Wakem sometimes came in and inspected the books, and Maggie felt that the meeting with Philip would be robbed of all pleasure in the presence of the two fathers. Some day, perhaps, she should see him when they could just shake hands, and she could tell him that she remembered his goodness to Tom, and the things he had said to her in the old days, though they could never be friends any more. It was not at all agitating to Maggie to see Philip again: she retained her childish gratitude and pity towards him, and remembered his cleverness; and in the early weeks of her loneliness she had continually recalled the image of him among the people who had been kind to her in life; often wishing she had him for a brother and a teacher, as they had fancied it might have been, in their talk together. But that sort of wishing had been banished along with other dreams that savoured of seeking her own will; and she thought, besides, that Philip might be altered by his life abroad—he might have become worldly, and really not care about her saying anything to him now. And yet, his face was wonderfully little altered—it was only a larger, more

manly copy of the pale small-featured boy's face, with the grey eyes and the boyish waving brown hair: there was the old deformity to awaken the old pity; and after all her meditations, Maggie felt that she really *should* like to say a few words to him. He might still be melancholy, as he always used to be, and like her to look at him kindly. She wondered if he remembered how he used to like her eyes; with that thought Maggie glanced towards the square looking-glass which was condemned to hang with its face towards the wall, and she half-started from her seat to reach it down; but she checked herself and snatched up her work, trying to repress the rising wishes by forcing her memory to recall snatches of hymns, until she saw Philip and his father returning along the road, and she could go down again.

It was far on in June now, and Maggie was inclined to lengthen the daily walk which was her one indulgence; but this day and the following she was so busy with work which must be finished that she never went beyond the gate, and satisfied her need of the open air by sitting out of doors. One of her frequent walks, when she was not obliged to go to St. Ogg's, was to a spot that lay beyond what was called the "Hill"—an insignificant rise of ground crowned by trees, lying along the side of the road which ran by the gates of Dorlcote Mill. Insignificant I call it, because in height it was hardly more than a bank: but there may come moments when Nature makes a mere bank a means towards a fateful result, and that is why I ask you to imagine this high bank crowned with trees, making an uneven wall for some quarter of a mile along the left side of Dorlcote Mill and the pleasant fields behind it, bounded by the murmuring Ripple. Just where this line of bank sloped down again to the level, a by-road turned off and led to the other side of the rise, where it was broken into very capricious hollows and mounds by the working of an exhausted stone-quarry—so long exhausted that both mounds and hollows were now clothed with brambles and trees, and here and there by a stretch of grass which a few sheep kept close-nibbled. In her childish days Maggie held this place, called the Red Deeps, in very great awe, and needed all her

confidence in Tom's bravery to reconcile her to an excursion thither —visions of robbers and fierce animals haunting every hollow. But now it had the charm for her which any broken ground, any mimic rock and ravine, have for the eyes that rest habitually on the level; especially in summer, when she could sit on a grassy hollow under the shadow of a branching ash, stooping aslant from the steep above her, and listen to the hum of insects, like tiniest bells on the garment of Silence, or see the sunlight piercing the distant boughs, as if to chase and drive home the truant heavenly blue of the wild hyacinths. In this June time too, the dog-roses were in their glory, and that was an additional reason why Maggie should direct her walk to the Red Deeps, rather than to any other spot, on the first day she was free to wander at her will—a pleasure she loved so well, that sometimes, in her ardours of renunciation, she thought she ought to deny herself the frequent indulgence in it.

You may see her now, as she walks down the favourite turning, and enters the Deeps by a narrow path through a group of Scotch firs—her tall figure and old lavender gown visible through an hereditary black silk shawl of some wide-meshed net-like material; and now she is sure of being unseen, she takes off her bonnet and ties it over her arm. One would certainly suppose her to be farther on in life than her seventeenth year—perhaps because of the slow resigned sadness of the glance, from which all search and unrest seem to have departed, perhaps because her broad-chested figure has the mould of early womanhood. Youth and health have withstood well the involuntary and voluntary hardships of her lot, and the nights in which she has lain on the hard floor for a penance have left no obvious trace; the eyes are liquid, the brown cheek is firm and rounded, the full lips are red. With her dark colouring and jet crown surmounting her tall figure, she seems to have a sort of kinship with the grand Scotch firs, at which she is looking up as if she loved them well. Yet one has a sense of uneasiness in looking at her—a sense of opposing elements, of which a fierce collision is imminent: surely there is a hushed expression, such as one often sees in older faces under borderless caps, out of keeping with the

resistant youth, which one expects to flash out in a sudden, passionate glance, that will dissipate all the quietude, like a damp fire leaping out again when all seemed safe.

But Maggie herself was not uneasy at this moment. She was calmly enjoying the free air, while she looked up at the old fir-trees, and thought that those broken ends of branches were the records of past storms, which had only made the red stems soar higher. But while her eyes were still turned upward, she became conscious of a moving shadow cast by the evening sun on the grassy path before her, and looked down with a startled gesture to see Philip Wakem, who first raised his hat, and then, blushing deeply, came forward to her and put out his hand. Maggie, too, coloured with surprise, which soon gave way to pleasure. She put out her hand and looked down at the deformed figure before her with frank eyes, filled for the moment with nothing but the memory of her child's feelings—a memory that was always strong in her. She was the first to speak.

"You startled me," she said, smiling faintly; "I never meet any one here. How came you to be walking here? Did you come to meet *me?*"

It was impossible not to perceive that Maggie felt herself a child again.

"Yes, I did," said Philip, still embarrassed: "I wished to see you very much. I watched a long while yesterday on the bank near your house to see if you would come out, but you never came. Then I watched again to-day, and when I saw the way you took, I kept you in sight and came down the bank, behind there. I hope you will not be displeased with me."

"No," said Maggie, with simple seriousness, walking on, as if she meant Philip to accompany her, "I'm very glad you came, for I wished very much to have an opportunity of speaking to you. I've never forgotten how good you were long ago to Tom, and me too; but I was not sure that you would remember us so well. Tom and I have had a great deal of trouble since then, and I think *that* makes one think more of what happened before the trouble came."

“I can’t believe that you have thought of me so much as I have thought of you,” said Philip, timidly. “Do you know, when I was away, I made a picture of you as you looked that morning in the study when you said you would not forget me.”

Philip drew a large miniature-case from his pocket, and opened it. Maggie saw her old self leaning on a table, with her black locks hanging down behind her ears, looking into space with strange, dreamy eyes. It was a water-colour sketch, of real merit as a portrait.

“O dear,” said Maggie, smiling, and flushed with pleasure, “what a queer little girl I was! I remember myself with my hair in that way, in that pink frock. I really *was* like a gypsy. I daresay I am now,” she added, after a little pause; “am I like what you expected me to be?”

The words might have been those of a coquette, but the full bright glance Maggie turned on Philip was not that of a coquette. She really did hope he liked her face as it was now, but it was simply the rising again of her innate delight in admiration and love. Philip met her eyes and looked at her in silence for a long moment, before he said, quietly, “No, Maggie.”

The light died out a little from Maggie’s face, and there was a slight trembling of the lip. Her eyelids fell lower, but she did not turn away her head, and Philip continued to look at her. Then he said, slowly—

“You are very much more beautiful than I thought you would be.”

“Am I?” said Maggie, the pleasure returning in a deeper flush. She turned her face away from him and took some steps, looking straight before her in silence, as if she were adjusting her consciousness to this new idea. Girls are so accustomed to think of dress as the main ground of vanity, that, in abstaining from the looking-glass, Maggie had thought more of abandoning all care for adornment than of renouncing the contemplation of her face. Comparing herself with elegant, wealthy young ladies, it had not occurred to her that she could produce any effect with her person.

Philip seemed to like the silence well. He walked by her side, watching her face, as if that sight left no room for any other wish. They had passed from among the fir-trees, and had now come to a green hollow almost surrounded by an amphitheatre of the pale pink dog-roses. But as the light about them had brightened, Maggie's face had lost its glow. She stood still when they were in the hollows, and, looking at Philip again, she said, in a serious, sad voice—

"I wish we could have been friends—I mean, if it would have been good and right for us. But that is the trial I have to bear in everything: I may not keep anything I used to love when I was little. The old books went; and Tom is different—and my father. It is like death. I must part with everything I cared for when I was a child. And I must part with you: we must never take any notice of each other again. That was what I wanted to speak to you for. I wanted to let you know that Tom and I can't do as we like about such things, and that if I behave as if I had forgotten all about you, it is not out of envy or pride—or—or any bad feeling."

Maggie spoke with more and more sorrowful gentleness as she went on, and her eyes began to fill with tears. The deepening expression of pain on Philip's face gave him a stronger resemblance to his boyish self, and made the deformity appeal more strongly to her pity.

"I know—I see all that you mean," he said, in a voice that had become feebler from discouragement: "I know what there is to keep us apart on both sides. But it is not right, Maggie—don't you be angry with me, I am so used to call you Maggie in my thoughts—it is not right to sacrifice everything to other people's unreasonable feelings. I would give up a great deal for *my* father; but I would not give up a friendship or—or an attachment of any sort, in obedience to any wish of his that I didn't recognise as right."

"I don't know," said Maggie, musingly. "Often, when I have been angry and discontented, it has seemed to me that I was not bound to give up anything; and I have gone on thinking till it has seemed to me that I could think away all my duty. But no good has ever come

of that—it was an evil state of mind. I'm quite sure that whatever I might do, I should wish in the end that I had gone without anything for myself, rather than have made my father's life harder to him."

"But would it make his life harder if we were to see each other sometimes?" said Philip. He was going to say something else, but checked himself.

"O, I'm sure he wouldn't like it. Don't ask me why, or anything about it," said Maggie, in a distressed tone. "My father feels so strongly about some things. He is not at all happy."

"No more am I," said Philip, impetuously: "*I* am not happy."

"Why?" said Maggie, gently. "At least—I ought not to ask—but I'm very, very sorry."

Philip turned to walk on, as if he had not patience to stand still any longer, and they went out of the hollow, winding amongst the trees and bushes in silence. After that last word of Philip's, Maggie could not bear to insist immediately on their parting.

"I've been a great deal happier," she said at last, timidly, "since I have given up thinking about what is easy and pleasant, and being discontented because I couldn't have my own will. Our life is determined for us—and it makes the mind very free when we give up wishing, and only think of bearing what is laid upon us, and doing what is given us to do."

"But I can't give up wishing," said Philip, impatiently. "It seems to me we can never give up longing and wishing while we are thoroughly alive. There are certain things we feel to be beautiful and good, and we *must* hunger after them. How can we ever be satisfied without them until our feelings are deadened? I delight in fine pictures—I long to be able to paint such. I strive and strive, and can't produce what I want. That is pain to me, and always *will* be pain, until my faculties lose their keenness, like aged eyes. Then there are many other things I long for"—here Philip hesitated a little, and then said—"things that other men have, and that will always be denied me. My life will have nothing great or beautiful in it; I would rather not have lived."

“O, Philip,” said Maggie, “I wish you didn’t feel so.” But her heart began to beat with something of Philip’s discontent.

“Well then,” said he, turning quickly round and fixing his grey eyes entreatingly in her face, “I should be contented to live, if you would let me see you sometimes.” Then, checked by a fear which her face suggested, he looked away again, and said, more calmly, “I have no friend to whom I can tell everything—no one who cares enough about me; and if I could only see you now and then, and you would let me talk to you a little, and show me that you cared for me—and that we may always be friends in heart, and help each other—then I might come to be glad of life.”

“But how can I see you, Philip?” said Maggie, falteringly. (Could she really do him good? It would be very hard to say “good-bye” this day, and not speak to him again. Here was a new interest to vary the days—it was so much easier to renounce the interest before it came.)

“If you would let me see you here sometimes—walk with you here—I would be contented if it were only once or twice in a month. *That* could injure no one’s happiness, and it would sweeten my life. Besides,” Philip went on, with all the inventive astuteness of love at one-and-twenty, “if there is any enmity between those who belong to us, we ought all the more to try and quench it by our friendship—I mean, that by our influence on both sides we might bring about a healing of the wounds that have been made in the past, if I could know everything about them. And I don’t believe there is any enmity in my own father’s mind: I think he has proved the contrary.”

Maggie shook her head slowly, and was silent, under conflicting thoughts. It seemed to her inclination, that to see Philip now and then, and keep up the bond of friendship with him, was something not only innocent, but good: perhaps she might really help him to find contentment as she had found it. The voice that said this made sweet music to Maggie; but athwart it there came an urgent monotonous warning from another voice which she had been learning to obey: the warning that such interviews implied secrecy

—implied doing something she would dread to be discovered in—something that, if discovered, must cause anger and pain; and that the admission of anything so near doubleness would act as a spiritual blight. Yet the music would swell out again, like chimes borne onward by a recurrent breeze, persuading her that the wrong lay all in the faults and weaknesses of others, and that there was such a thing as futile sacrifice for one to the injury of another. It was very cruel for Philip that he should be shrunk from, because of an unjustifiable vindictiveness towards his father—poor Philip, whom some people would shrink from only because he was deformed. The idea that he might become her lover, or that her meeting him could cause disapproval in that light, had not occurred to her; and Philip saw the absence of this idea clearly enough—saw it with a certain pang, although it made her consent to his request the less unlikely. There was bitterness to him in the perception that Maggie was almost as frank and unconstrained towards him as when she was a child.

"I can't say either yes or no," she said at last, turning round and walking towards the way she had come; "I must wait, lest I should decide wrongly. I must seek for guidance."

"May I come again, then—to-morrow—or the next day—or next week?"

"I think I had better write," said Maggie, faltering again. "I have to go to St. Ogg's sometimes, and I can put the letter in the post."

"O no," said Philip, eagerly; "that would not be so well. My father might see the letter—and—he has not any enmity, I believe, but he views things differently from me: he thinks a great deal about wealth and position. Pray let me come here once more. *Tell* me when it shall be; or if you can't tell me, I will come as often as I can till I do see you."

"I think it must be so, then," said Maggie, "for I can't be quite certain of coming here any particular evening."

Maggie felt a great relief in adjourning the decision. She was free now to enjoy the minutes of companionship; she almost thought she

might linger a little; the next time they met she should have to pain Philip by telling him her determination.

"I can't help thinking," she said, looking smilingly at him, after a few moments of silence, "how strange it is that we should have met and talked to each other, just as if it had been only yesterday when we parted at Lorton. And yet we must both be very much altered in those five years—I think it is five years. How was it you seemed to have a sort of feeling that I was the same Maggie?—I was not quite so sure that you would be the same: I know you are so clever, and you must have seen and learnt so much to fill your mind: I was not quite sure you would care about me now."

"I have never had any doubt that you would be the same, whenever I might see you," said Philip. "I mean, the same in everything that made me like you better than any one else. I don't want to explain that: I don't think any of the strongest effects our natures are susceptible of can ever be explained. We can neither detect the process by which they are arrived at, nor the mode in which they act on us. The greatest of painters only once painted a mysteriously divine child; he couldn't have told how he did it, and we can't tell why we feel it to be divine. I think there are stores laid up in our human nature that our understandings can make no complete inventory of. Certain strains of music affect me so strangely—I can never hear them without their changing my whole attitude of mind for a time, and if the effect would last, I might be capable of heroisms."

"Ah! I know what you mean about music—*I* feel so," said Maggie, clasping her hands with her old impetuosity. "At least," she added, in a saddened tone, "I used to feel so when I had any music: I never have any now except the organ at church."

"And you long for it, Maggie?" said Philip, looking at her with affectionate pity. "Ah, you can have very little that is beautiful in your life. Have you many books? You were so fond of them when you were a little girl."

They were come back to the hollow, round which the dog-roses grew, and they both paused under the charm of the faëry evening light, reflected from the pale pink clusters.

“No, I have given up books,” said Maggie, quietly, “except a very, very few.”

Philip had already taken from his pocket a small volume, and was looking at the back, as he said—

“Ah, this is the second volume, I see, else you might have liked to take it home with you. I put it in my pocket because I am studying a scene for a picture.”

Maggie had looked at the back too, and saw the title: it revived an old impression with overmastering force.

“ ‘The Pirate,’ ” she said, taking the book from Philip’s hands. “O, I began that once; I read to where Minna is walking with Cleveland, and I could never get to read the rest. I went on with it in my own head, and I made several endings; but they were all unhappy. I could never make a happy ending out of that beginning. Poor Minna! I wonder what is the real end. For a long while I couldn’t get my mind away from the Shetland Isles—I used to feel the wind blowing on me from the rough sea.”

Maggie spoke rapidly, with glistening eyes.

“Take that volume home with you, Maggie,” said Philip, watching her with delight. “I don’t want it now. I shall make a picture of you instead—you, among the Scotch firs and the slanting shadows.”

Maggie had not heard a word he had said: she was absorbed in a page at which she had opened. But suddenly she closed the book, and gave it back to Philip, shaking her head with a backward movement, as if to say “avaunt” to floating visions.

“Do keep it, Maggie,” said Philip, entreatingly; “it will give you pleasure.”

“No, thank you,” said Maggie, putting it aside with her hand and walking on. “It would make me in love with this world again, as I

used to be—it would make me long to see and know many things—it would make me long for a full life."

"But you will not always be shut up in your present lot: why should you starve your mind in that way? It is narrow asceticism—I don't like to see you persisting in it, Maggie. Poetry and art and knowledge are sacred and pure."

"But not for me—not for me," said Maggie, walking more hurriedly. "Because I should want too much. I must wait—this life will not last long."

"Don't hurry away from me without saying 'good-bye,' Maggie," said Philip, as they reached the group of Scotch firs, and she continued still to walk along without speaking. "I must not go any farther, I think, must I?"

"O no, I forgot; good-bye," said Maggie, pausing, and putting out her hand to him. The action brought her feeling back in a strong current to Philip; and after they had stood looking at each other in silence for a few moments, with their hands clasped, she said, withdrawing her hand,

"I'm very grateful to you for thinking of me all those years. It is very sweet to have people love us. What a wonderful, beautiful thing it seems that God should have made your heart so that you could care about a queer little girl whom you only knew for a few weeks! I remember saying to you, that I thought you cared for me more than Tom did."

"Ah, Maggie," said Philip, almost fretfully, "you would never love me so well as you love your brother."

"Perhaps not," said Maggie, simply; "but then, you know, the first thing I ever remember in my life is standing with Tom by the side of the Floss, while he held my hand: everything before that is dark to me. But I shall never forget you—though we must keep apart."

"Don't say so, Maggie," said Philip. "If I kept that little girl in my mind for five years, didn't I earn some part in her? She ought not to take herself quite away from me."

“Not if I were free,” said Maggie; “but I am not—I must submit.” She hesitated a moment, and then added, “And I wanted to say to you, that you had better not take more notice of my brother than just bowing to him. He once told me not to speak to you again, and he doesn’t change his mind.… O dear, the sun is set. I am too long away. Good-bye.” She gave him her hand once more.

“I shall come here as often as I can, till I see you again, Maggie. Have some feeling for *me* as well as for others.”

“Yes, yes, I have,” said Maggie, hurrying away, and quickly disappearing behind the last fir-tree; though Philip’s gaze after her remained immovable for minutes as if he saw her still.

Maggie went home, with an inward conflict already begun; Philip went home to do nothing but remember and hope. You can hardly help blaming him severely. He was four or five years older than Maggie, and had a full consciousness of his feeling towards her to aid him in foreseeing the character his contemplated interviews with her would bear in the opinion of a third person. But you must not suppose that he was capable of a gross selfishness, or that he could have been satisfied without persuading himself that he was seeking to infuse some happiness into Maggie’s life—seeking this even more than any direct ends for himself. He could give her sympathy—he could give her help. There was not the slightest promise of love towards him in her manner; it was nothing more than the sweet girlish tenderness she had shown him when she was twelve: perhaps she would never love him—perhaps no woman ever *could* love him: well, then, he would endure that; he should at least have the happiness of seeing her—of feeling some nearness to her. And he clutched passionately the possibility that she *might* love him: perhaps the feeling would grow, if she could come to associate him with that watchful tenderness which her nature would be so keenly alive to. If any woman could love him, surely Maggie was that woman: there was such wealth of love in her, and there was no one to claim it all. Then—the pity of it, that a mind like hers should be withering in its very youth, like a young forest-tree, for want of the light and space it was formed to flourish in! Could he not hinder

that, by persuading her out of her system of privation? He would be her guardian angel; he would do anything, bear anything, for her sake—except not seeing her.

CHAPTER II

Aunt Glegg Learns the Breadth of Bob's Thumb

While Maggie's life-struggles had lain almost entirely within her own soul, one shadowy army fighting another, and the slain shadows for ever rising again, Tom was engaged in a dustier, noisier warfare, grappling with more substantial obstacles, and gaining more definite conquests. So it has been since the days of Hecuba, and of Hector, Tamer of horses: inside the gates, the women with streaming hair and uplifted hands offering prayers, watching the world's combat from afar, filling their long, empty days with memories and fears: outside, the men, in fierce struggle with things divine and human, quenching memory in the stronger light of purpose, losing the sense of dread and even of wounds in the hurrying ardour of action.

From what you have seen of Tom, I think he is not a youth of whom you would prophesy failure in anything he had thoroughly wished: the wagers are likely to be on his side, notwithstanding his small success in the classics. For Tom had never desired success in this field of enterprise; and for getting a fine flourishing growth of stupidity there is nothing like pouring out on a mind a good amount of subjects in which it feels no interest. But now Tom's strong will bound together his integrity, his pride, his family regrets, and his personal ambition, and made them one force, concentrating his efforts and surmounting discouragements. His uncle Deane, who watched him closely, soon began to conceive hopes of him, and to be rather proud that he had brought into the employment of the firm a nephew who appeared to be made of such good commercial stuff. The real kindness of placing him in the warehouse first was soon evident to Tom, in the hints his uncle began to throw out, that after a time he might perhaps be trusted to travel at certain seasons, and buy in for the firm various vulgar commodities with which I

need not shock refined ears in this place; and it was doubtless with a view to this result that Mr. Deane, when he expected to take his wine alone, would tell Tom to step in and sit with him an hour, and would pass that hour in much lecturing and catechising concerning articles of export and import, with an occasional excursus of more indirect utility on the relative advantages to the merchants of St. Ogg's of having goods brought in their own and in foreign bottoms —a subject on which Mr. Deane, as a shipowner, naturally threw off a few sparks when he got warmed with talk and wine. Already, in the second year, Tom's salary was raised; but all, except the price of his dinner and clothes, went home into the tin box; and he shunned comradeship, lest it should lead him into expenses in spite of himself. Not that Tom was moulded on the spooney type of the Industrious Apprentice; he had a very strong appetite for pleasure— would have liked to be a Tamer of horses, and to make a distinguished figure in all neighbouring eyes, dispensing treats and benefits to others with well-judged liberality, and being pronounced one of the finest young fellows of those parts; nay, he determined to achieve these things sooner or later; but his practical shrewdness told him that the means to such achievements could only lie for him in present abstinence and self-denial: there were certain milestones to be passed, and one of the first was the payment of his father's debts. Having made up his mind on that point, he strode along without swerving, contracting some rather saturnine sternness, as a young man is likely to do who has a premature call upon him for self-reliance. Tom felt intensely that common cause with his father which springs from family pride, and was bent on being irreproachable as a son; but his growing experience caused him to pass much silent criticism on the rashness and imprudence of his father's past conduct: their dispositions were not in sympathy, and Tom's face showed little radiance during his few home hours. Maggie had an awe of him, against which she struggled as something unfair to her consciousness of wider thoughts and deeper motives; but it was of no use to struggle. A character at unity with itself—that performs what it intends, subdues every counteracting

impulse, and has no visions beyond the distinctly possible—is strong by its very negations.

You may imagine that Tom's more and more obvious unlikeness to his father was well fitted to conciliate the maternal aunts and uncles; and Mr. Deane's favourable reports and predictions to Mr. Glegg concerning Tom's qualifications for business, began to be discussed amongst them with various acceptance. He was likely, it appeared, to do the family credit, without causing it any expense and trouble. Mrs. Pullet had always thought it strange if Tom's excellent complexion, so entirely that of the Dodsons, did not argue a certainty that he would turn out well, his juvenile errors of running down the peacock, and general disrespect to his aunts, only indicating a tinge of Tulliver blood which he had doubtless outgrown. Mr. Glegg, who had contracted a cautious liking for Tom ever since his spirited and sensible behaviour when the execution was in the house, was now warming into a resolution to further his prospects actively—some time, when an opportunity offered of doing so in a prudent manner, without ultimate loss; but Mrs. Glegg observed that she was not given to speak without book, as some people were; that those who said least were most likely to find their words made good; and that when the right moment came, it would be seen who could do something better than talk. Uncle Pullet, after silent meditation for a period of several lozenges, came distinctly to the conclusion, that when a young man was likely to do well, it was better not to meddle with him.

Tom, meanwhile, had shown no disposition to rely on any one but himself, though, with a natural sensitiveness towards all indications of favourable opinion, he was glad to see his uncle Glegg look in on him sometimes in a friendly way during business hours, and glad to be invited to dine at his house, though he usually preferred declining on the ground that he was not sure of being punctual. But about a year ago, something had occurred which induced Tom to test his uncle Glegg's friendly disposition.

Bob Jakin, who rarely returned from one of his rounds without seeing Tom and Maggie, awaited him on the bridge as he was

coming home from St. Ogg's one evening, that they might have a little private talk. He took the liberty of asking if Mr. Tom had ever thought of making money by trading a bit on his own account. Trading, how? Tom wished to know. Why, by sending out a bit of a cargo to foreign ports; because Bob had a particular friend who had offered to do a little business for him in that way in Laceham goods, and would be glad to serve Mr. Tom on the same footing. Tom was interested at once, and begged for full explanation; wondering he had not thought of this plan before. He was so well pleased with the prospect of a speculation that might change the slow process of addition into multiplication, that he at once determined to mention the matter to his father, and get his consent to appropriate some of the savings in the tin box to the purchase of a small cargo. He would rather not have consulted his father, but he had just paid his last quarter's money into the tin box, and there was no other resource. All the savings were there; for Mr. Tulliver would not consent to put the money out at interest lest he should lose it. Since he had speculated in the purchase of some corn, and had lost by it, he could not be easy without keeping the money under his eye.

Tom approached the subject carefully, as he was seated on the hearth with his father that evening, and Mr. Tulliver listened, leaning forward in his arm-chair and looking up in Tom's face with a sceptical glance. His first impulse was to give a positive refusal, but he was in some awe of Tom's wishes, and since he had had the sense of being an "unlucky" father, he had lost some of his old peremptoriness and determination to be master. He took the key of the bureau from his pocket, got out the key of the large chest, and fetched down the tin box—slowly, as if he were trying to defer the moment of a painful parting. Then he seated himself against the table, and opened the box with that little padlock-key which he fingered in his waistcoat pocket in all vacant moments. There they were, the dingy bank-notes and the bright sovereigns, and he counted them out on the table—only a hundred and sixteen pounds in two years, after all the pinching.

“How much do you want, then?” he said, speaking as if the words burnt his lips.

“Suppose I begin with the thirty-six pounds, father?” said Tom.

Mr. Tulliver separated this sum from the rest, and, keeping his hand over it, said,—

“It’s as much as I can save out o’ my pay in a year.”

“Yes, father: it is such slow work—saving out of the little money we get. And in this way we might double our savings.”

“Ay, my lad,” said the father, keeping his hand on the money, “but you might lose it—you might lose a year o’ my life—and I haven’t got many.”

Tom was silent.

“And you know I wouldn’t pay a dividend with the first hundred, because I wanted to see it all in a lump—and when I see it, I’m sure on’t. If you trust to luck, it’s sure to be against me. It’s Old Harry’s got the luck in his hands; and if I lose one year, I shall never pick it up again—death ’ull o’ertake me.”

Mr. Tulliver’s voice trembled, and Tom was silent for a few minutes before he said,—

“I’ll give it up, father, since you object to it so strongly.”

But, unwilling to abandon the scheme altogether, he determined to ask his uncle Glegg to venture twenty pounds, on condition of receiving five per cent of the profits. That was really a very small thing to ask. So when Bob called the next day at the wharf to know the decision, Tom proposed that they should go together to his uncle Glegg’s to open the business; for his diffident pride clung to him, and made him feel that Bob’s tongue would relieve him from some embarrassment.

Mr. Glegg, at the pleasant hour of four in the afternoon of a hot August day, was naturally counting his wall-fruit to assure himself that the sum total had not varied since yesterday. To him entered Tom, in what appeared to Mr. Glegg very questionable companionship: that of a man with a pack on his back—for Bob was

equipped for a new journey—and of a huge brindled bull-terrier, who walked with a slow swaying movement from side to side, and glanced from under his eyelids with a surly indifference which might after all be a cover to the most offensive designs. Mr. Glegg's spectacles, which had been assisting him in counting the fruit, made these suspicious details alarmingly evident to him.

"Heigh! heigh! Keep that dog back, will you?" he shouted, snatching up a stake and holding it before him as a shield when the visitors were within three yards of him.

"Get out wi' you, Mumps," said Bob, with a kick. "He's as quiet as a lamb, sir,"—an observation which Mumps corroborated by a low growl as he retreated behind his master's legs.

"Why, what ever does this mean, Tom?" said Mr. Glegg. "Have you brought information about the scoundrels as cut my trees?" If Bob came in the character of "information," Mr. Glegg saw reasons for tolerating some irregularity.

"No, sir," said Tom: "I came to speak to you about a little matter of business of my own."

"Ay—well; but what has this dog got to do with it?" said the old gentleman, getting mild again.

"It's my dog, sir," said the ready Bob. "An' it's me as put Mr. Tom up to the bit o' business; for Mr. Tom's been a friend o' mine iver since I was a little chap: fust thing iver I did was frightenin' the birds for th' old master. An' if a bit o' luck turns up, I'm allays thinkin' if I can let Mr. Tom have a pull at it. An' it's a downright roarin' shame, as when he's got the chance o' making a bit o' money wi' sending goods out—ten or twelve per zent clear, when freight an' commission's paid—as he shouldn't lay hold o' the chance for want o' money. An' when there's the Laceham goods—lors! they're made o' purpose for folks as want to send out a little carguy; light, an' take up no room—you may pack twenty pound so as you can't see the passill: an' they're manifacturs as please fools, so I reckon they aren't like to want a market. An' I'd go to Laceham an' buy in the goods for Mr. Tom along wi' my own. An' there's the shuper-

cargo o' the bit of a vessel as is goin' to take 'em out. I know him partic'lar; he's a solid man, an' got a family i' the town here. Salt, his name is—an' a briny chap he is too—an' if you don't believe me, I can take you to him."

Uncle Glegg stood open-mouthed with astonishment at this unembarrassed loquacity, with which his understanding could hardly keep pace. He looked at Bob, first over his spectacles, then through them, then over them again; while Tom, doubtful of his uncle's impression, began to wish he had not brought this singular Aaron or mouthpiece: Bob's talk appeared less seemly, now some one besides himself was listening to it.

"You seem to be a knowing fellow," said Mr. Glegg, at last.

"Ay, sir, you say true," returned Bob, nodding his head aside; "I think my head's all alive inside like an old cheese, for I'm so full o' plans, one knocks another over. If I hadn't Mumps to talk to, I should get top-heavy an' tumble in a fit. I suppose it's because I niver went to school much. That's what I jaw my old mother for. I says, 'You should ha' sent me to school a bit more,' I says—'an' then I could ha' read i' the books like fun, an' kep' my head cool an' empty.' Lors, she's fine an' comfor'ble now, my old mother is: she ates her baked meat an' taters as often as she likes. For I'm gettin' so full o' money, I must hev a wife to spend it for me. But it's botherin', a wife is—and Mumps mightn't like her."

Uncle Glegg, who regarded himself as a jocose man since he had retired from business, was beginning to find Bob amusing, but he had still a disapproving observation to make, which kept his face serious.

"Ah," he said, "I should think you're at a loss for ways o' spending your money, else you wouldn't keep that big dog, to eat as much as two Christians. It's shameful—shameful!" But he spoke more in sorrow than in anger, and quickly added—

"But, come now, let's hear more about this business, Tom. I suppose you want a little sum to make a venture with. But where's all your own money? You don't spend it all—eh?"

“No, sir,” said Tom, colouring; “but my father is unwilling to risk it, and I don’t like to press him. If I could get twenty or thirty pounds to begin with, I could pay five per cent for it, and then I could gradually make a little capital of my own, and do without a loan.”

“Ay …ay,” said Mr. Glegg, in an approving tone; “that’s not a bad notion, and I won’t say as I wouldn’t be your man. But it ‘ull be as well for me to see this Salt, as you talk on. And then … here’s this friend o’ yours offers to buy the goods for you. Perhaps you’ve got somebody to stand surety for you if the money’s put into your hands?” added the cautious old gentleman, looking over his spectacles at Bob.

“I don’t think that’s necessary, uncle,” said Tom. “At least, I mean it would not be necessary for me, because I know Bob well; but perhaps it would be right for you to have some security.”

“You get your percentage out o’ the purchase, I suppose?” said Mr. Glegg, looking at Bob.

“No, sir,” said Bob, rather indignantly; “I didn’t offer to get a apple for Mr. Tom, o’ purpose to hev a bite out of it myself. When I play folks tricks there’ll be more fun in ’em nor that.”

“Well, but it’s nothing but right you should have a small percentage,” said Mr. Glegg. “I’ve no opinion o’ transactions where folks do things for nothing. It allays looks bad.”

“Well, then,” said Bob, whose keenness saw at once what was implied, “I’ll tell you what I get by’t, an’ it’s money in my pocket in the end:—I make myself look big, wi’ makin’ a bigger purchase. That’s what I’m thinking on. Lors! I’m a ’cute chap—I am.”

“Mr. Glegg, Mr. Glegg,” said a severe voice from the open parlour window, “pray are you coming in to tea?—or are you going to stand talking with packmen till you get murdered in the open daylight?”

“Murdered?” said Mr. Glegg; “what’s the woman talking of? Here’s your nephey Tom come about a bit o’ business.”

“Murdered—yes—it isn’t many ’sizes ago since a packman murdered a young woman in a lone place, and stole her thimble, and threw her body into a ditch.”

“Nay, nay,” said Mr. Glegg, soothingly, “you’re thinking o’ the man wi’ no legs, as drove a dog-cart.”

“Well, it’s the same thing, Mr. Glegg—only you’re fond o’ contradicting what I say; and if my nephey’s come about business, it ’ud be more fitting if you’d bring him into the house, and let his aunt know about it, instead o’ whispering in corners, in that plotting, underminding way.”

“Well, well,” said Mr. Glegg, “we’ll come in now.”

“You needn’t stay here,” said the lady to Bob, in a loud voice, adapted to the moral not the physical distance between them. “We don’t want anything. I don’t deal wi’ packmen. Mind you shut the gate after you.”

“Stop a bit; not so fast,” said Mr. Glegg: “I haven’t done with this young man yet. Come in, Tom; come in,” he added, stepping in at the French window.

“Mr. Glegg,” said Mrs. G., in a fatal tone, “if you’re going to let that man and his dog in on my carpet, before my very face, be so good as to let me know. A wife’s got a right to ask that, I hope.”

“Don’t you be uneasy, mum,” said Bob, touching his cap. He saw at once that Mrs. Glegg was a bit of game worth running down, and longed to be at the sport; “we’ll stay out upo’ the gravel here—Mumps and me will. Mumps knows his company—he does. I might hish at him by th’ hour together, before he’d fly at a real gentlewoman like you. It’s wonderful how he knows which is the good-looking ladies—and’s partic’lar fond of em when they’ve good shapes. Lors!” added Bob, laying down his pack on the gravel, “it’s a thousand pities such a lady as you shouldn’t deal with a packman, i’stead o’ goin’ into these new-fangled shops, where there’s half-a-dozen fine gents wi’ their chins propped up wi’ a stiff stock, a-looking like bottles wi’ ornamental stoppers, an’ all got to get their dinner out of a bit o’ calico: it stan’s to reason you must pay three

times the price you pay a packman, as is the nat'ral way o' gettin' goods—an' pays no rent, an' isn't forced to throttle himself till the lies are squeezed out on him, whether he will or no. But lors! mum, you know what it is better nor I do—*you* can see through them shopmen, I'll be bound."

"Yes, I reckon I can, and through the packmen too," observed Mrs. Glegg, intending to imply that Bob's flattery had produced no effect on *her;* while her husband, standing behind her with his hands in his pockets and legs apart, winked and smiled with conjugal delight at the probability of his wife's being circumvented.

"Ay, to be sure, mum," said Bob. "Why, you must ha' dealt wi' no end o' packmen when you war a young lass—before the master here had the luck to set eyes on you. I know where you lived, I do— seen th' house many a time—close upon Squire Darleigh's—a stone house wi' steps…."

"Ah, that it had," said Mrs. Glegg, pouring out the tea. "You know something o' my family then … are you akin to that packman with a squint in his eye, as used to bring th' Irish linen?"

"Look you there now!" said Bob, evasively. "Didn't I know as you'd remember the best bargains you've made in your life was made wi' packmen? Why, you see, even a squintin' packman's better nor a shopman as can see straight. Lors! if I'd had the luck to call at the stone house wi' my pack, as lies here,"—stooping and thumping the bundle emphatically with his fist,—"an' th' handsome young lasses all stannin' out on the stone steps, it 'ud ha' been summat like openin' a pack—that would. It's on'y the poor houses now as a packman calls on, if it isn't for the sake o' the sarvant-maids. They're paltry times—these are. Why, mum, look at the printed cottons now, an' what they was when you wore 'em—why, you wouldn't put such a thing on now, I can see. It must be first-rate quality—the manifactur as you'd buy—summat as 'ud wear as well as your own faitures."

"Yes, better quality nor any you're like to carry: you've got nothing first-rate but brazenness, I'll be bound," said Mrs. Glegg,

with a triumphant sense of her insurmountable sagacity. “Mr. Glegg, are you going ever to sit down to your tea? Tom, there’s a cup for you.”

“You speak true there, mum,” said Bob. “My pack isn’t for ladies like you. The time’s gone by for that. Bargains picked up dirt cheap! A bit o’ damage here an’ there, as can be cut out, or else niver seen i’ the wearin’; but not fit to offer to rich folks as can pay for the look o’ things as nobody sees. I’m not the man as ’ud offer t’ open my pack to you, mum: no, no; I’m a imperent chap, as you say—these times makes folks imperent—but I’m not up to the mark o’ that.”

“Why, what goods do you carry in your pack?” said Mrs. Glegg. “Fine-coloured things, I suppose—shawls an’ that?”

“All sorts, mum, all sorts,” said Bob, thumping his bundle; “but let us say no more about that, if *you* please. I’m here upo’ Mr. Tom’s business, an’ I’m not the man to take up the time wi’ my own.”

“And pray, what *is* this business as is to be kept from me?” said Mrs. Glegg, who, solicited by a double curiosity, was obliged to let the one-half wait.

“A little plan o’ nephey Tom’s here,” said good-natured Mr. Glegg; “and not altogether a bad un, I think. A little plan for making money: that’s the right sort o’ plan for young folks as have got their fortin to make, eh, Jane?”

“But I hope it isn’t a plan where he expects iverything to be done for him by his friends: that’s what the young folks think of mostly nowadays. And pray, what has this packman got to do wi’ what goes on in our family? Can’t you speak for yourself, Tom, and let your aunt know things, as a nephey should?”

“This is Bob Jakin, aunt,” said Tom, bridling the irritation that aunt Glegg’s voice always produced. “I’ve known him ever since we were little boys. He’s a very good fellow, and always ready to do me a kindness. And he has had some experience in sending goods out—a small part of a cargo as a private speculation; and he thinks, if I could begin to do a little in the same way, I might make some money. A large interest is got in that way.”

“Large int’rest?” said aunt Glegg, with eagerness; “and what do you call large int’rest?”

“Ten or twelve per cent, Bob says, after expenses are paid.”

“Then why wasn’t I let to know o’ such things before, Mr. Glegg?” said Mrs. Glegg, turning to her husband, with a deep grating tone of reproach. “Haven’t you allays told me as there was no getting more nor five per cent?”

“Pooh, pooh, nonsense, my good woman,” said Mr. Glegg. “You couldn’t go into trade, could you? You can’t get more than five per cent with security.”

“But I can turn a bit o’ money for you, an’ welcome, mum,” said Bob, “if you’d like to risk it—not as there’s any risk to speak on. But if you’d a mind to lend a bit o’ money to Mr. Tom, he’d pay you six or seven per zent, an’ get a trifle for himself as well; an’ a good-natur’d lady like you ’ud like the feel o’ the money better if your nephey took part on it.”

“What do you say, Mrs. G.?” said Mr. Glegg. “I’ve a notion, when I’ve made a bit more inquiry, as I shall perhaps start Tom here with a bit of a nest-egg—he’ll pay me int’rest, you know—an’ if you’ve got some little sums lyin’ idle twisted up in a stockin’ toe, or that.…”

“Mr. Glegg, it’s beyond iverything! You’ll go and give information to the tramps next, as they may come and rob me.”

“Well, well, as I was sayin’, if you like to join me wi’ twenty pounds, you can—I’ll make it fifty. That’ll be a pretty good nest-egg—eh, Tom?”

“You’re not counting on me, Mr. Glegg, I hope,” said his wife. “You could do fine things wi’ my money, I don’t doubt.”

“Very well,” said Mr. Glegg, rather snappishly, “then we’ll do without you. I shall go with you to see this Salt,” he added, turning to Bob.

“And now, I suppose, you’ll go all the other way, Mr. Glegg,” said Mrs. G., “and want to shut me out o’ my own nephey’s business. I

never said I wouldn't put money into it—I don't say as it shall be twenty pounds, though you're so ready to say it for me—but he'll see some day as his aunt's in the right not to risk the money she's saved for him till it's proved as it won't be lost."

"Ay, that's a pleasant sort o' risk, that is," said Mr. Glegg, indiscreetly winking at Tom, who couldn't avoid smiling. But Bob stemmed the injured lady's outburst.

"Ay, mum," he said, admiringly, "you know what's what—you do. An' it's nothing but fair. *You* see how the first bit of a job answers, an' then you'll come down handsome. Lors, it's a fine thing to hev good kin. I got my bit of a nest-egg, as the master calls it, all by my own sharpness—ten suvreigns it was—wi' dousing the fire at Torry's mill, an' it's growed an' growed by a bit an' a bit, till I'n got a matter o' thirty pound to lay out, besides makin' my mother comfor'ble. I should get more, on'y I'm such a soft wi' the women—I can't help lettin' 'em hev such good bargains. There's this bundle, now" (thumping it lustily), "any other chap 'ud make a pretty penny out on it. But me!… lors, I shall sell 'em for pretty near what I paid for 'em."

"Have you got a bit of good net, now?" said Mrs. Glegg, in a patronising tone, moving from the tea-table, and folding her napkin.

"Eh, mum, not what you'd think it worth your while to look at. I'd scorn to show it you. It 'ud be an insult to you."

"But let me see," said Mrs. Glegg, still patronising. "If they're damaged goods, they're like enough to be a bit the better quality."

"No, mum. I know my place," said Bob, lifting up his pack and shouldering it. "I'm not going t' expose the lowness o' my trade to a lady like you. Packs is come down i' the world: it 'ud cut you to th' heart to see the difference. I'm at your sarvice, sir, when you've a mind to go and see Salt."

"All in good time," said Mr. Glegg, really unwilling to cut short the dialogue. "Are you wanted at the wharf, Tom?"

"No, sir; I left Stowe in my place."

“Come, put down your pack, and let me see,” said Mrs. Glegg, drawing a chair to the window, and seating herself with much dignity.

“Don’t you ask it, mum,” said Bob, entreatingly.

“Make no more words,” said Mrs. Glegg, severely, “but do as I tell you.”

Eh, mum, I’m loth—that I am,” said Bob, slowly depositing his pack on the step, and beginning to untie it with unwilling fingers. “But what you order shall be done” (much fumbling in pauses between the sentences). “It’s not as you’ll buy a single thing on me.… I’d be sorry for you to do it … for think o’ them poor women up i’ the villages there, as niver stir a hundred yards from home … it ’ud be a pity for anybody to buy up their bargains. Lors, it’s as good as a junketing to ’em when they see me wi’ my pack … an’ I shall niver pick up such bargains for ’em again. Least ways, I’ve no time now, for I’m off to Laceham. See here, now,” Bob went on, becoming rapid again, and holding up a scarlet woollen kerchief with an embroidered wreath in the corner; “here’s a thing to make a lass’s mouth water, an’ on’y two shillin’—an’ why? Why, cause there’s a bit of a moth-hole i’ this plain end. Lors, I think the moths an’ the mildew was sent by Providence o’ purpose to cheapen the goods a bit for the good-lookin’ women as han’t got much money. If it hadn’t been for the moths, now, every hankicher on ’em ’ud ha’ gone to the rich handsome ladies, like you, mum, at five shillin’ apiece—not a farthin’ less; but what does the moth do? Why, it nibbles off three shillin’ o’ the price i’ no time, an’ then a packman like me can carry’t to the poor lasses as live under the dark thack, to make a bit of a blaze for ’em. Lors, it’s as good as a fire, to look at such a hankicher!”

Bob held it at a distance for admiration, but Mrs. Glegg said sharply—

“Yes, but nobody wants a fire this time o’ year. Put these coloured things by—let me look at your nets, if you’ve got em.”

“Eh, mum, I told you how it ’ud be,” said Bob, flinging aside the coloured things with an air of desperation. “I knowed it ’ud turn again’ you to look at such paltry articles as I carry. Here’s a piece o’ figured muslin now—what’s the use o’ you lookin’ at it? You might as well look at poor folks’s victual, mum—it ’ud on’y take away your appetite. There’s a yard i’ the middle on’t as the pattern’s all missed—lors, why it’s a muslin as the Princess Victoree might ha’ wore—but,” added Bob, flinging it behind him on to the turf, as if to save Mrs. Glegg’s eyes, “it’ll be bought up by the huckster’s wife at Fibb’s End—that’s where *it’ll* go—ten shillin’ for the whole lot—ten yards, countin’ the damaged un—five-an’-twenty shillin’ ’ud ha’ been the price—not a penny less. But I’ll say no more, mum; it’s nothing to you—a piece o’ muslin like that; you can afford to pay three times the money for a thing as isn’t half so good. It’s nets *you* talked on; well, I’ve got a piece as ’ull serve you to make fun on …”

“Bring me that muslin,” said Mrs. Glegg: “it’s a buff—I’m partial to buff.”

“Eh, but a *damaged* thing,” said Bob, in a tone of deprecating disgust. “You’d do nothing with it, mum—you’d give it to the cook, I know you would—an’ it ’ud be a pity—she’d look too much like a lady in it—it’s unbecoming for servants.”

“Fetch it, and let me see you measure it,” said Mrs. Glegg, authoritatively.

Bob obeyed with ostentatious reluctance.

“See what there is over measure!” he said, holding forth the extra half-yard, while Mrs. Glegg was busy examining the damaged yard, and throwing her head back to see how far the fault would be lost on a distant view.

“I’ll give you six shilling for it,” she said, throwing it down with the air of a person who mentions an ultimatum.

“Didn’t I tell you now, mum, as it ’ud hurt your feelings to look at my pack? That damaged bit’s turned your stomach now—I see it has,” said Bob, wrapping the muslin up with the utmost quickness, and apparently about to fasten up his pack. “You’re used to seein’ a

different sort o' article carried by packmen, when you lived at the stone house. Packs is come down i' the world; I told you that: *my* goods are for common folks. Mrs. Pepper 'ull give me ten shillin' for that muslin, an' be sorry as I didn't ask her more. Such articles answer i' the wearin'—they keep their colour till the threads melt away i' the wash-tub, an' that won't be while *I*'m a young un."

"Well, seven shilling," said Mrs. Glegg.

"Put it out o' your mind, mum, now do," said Bob. "Here's a bit o' net, then, for you to look at before I tie up my pack: just for you to see what my trade's come to: spotted and sprigged, you see, beautiful, but yallow—'s been lyin' by an' got the wrong colour. I could niver ha' bought such net, if it hadn't been yallow. Lors, it's took me a deal o' study to know the vally o' such articles; when I begun to carry a pack, I was as ignirant as a pig—net or calico was all the same to me. I thought them things the most vally as was the thickest. I was took in dreadful—for I'm a straightforrard chap—up to no tricks, mum. I can on'y say my nose is my own, for if I went beyond, I should lose myself pretty quick. An' I gev five-an'-eightpence for that piece o' net—if I was to tell y' anything else I should be tellin' you fibs: an' five-an'-eightpence I shall ask for it—not a penny more—for it's a woman's article, an' I like to 'commodate the women. Five-an'-eightpence for six yards—as cheap as if it was only the dirt on it as was paid for."

"I don't mind having three yards of it," said Mrs. Glegg.

"Why, there's but six altogether," said Bob. "No, mum, it isn't worth your while; you can go to the shop to-morrow an' get the same pattern ready whitened. It's on'y three times the money—what's that to a lady like you?" He gave an emphatic tie to his bundle.

"Come, lay me out that muslin," said Mrs. Glegg. "Here's eight shilling for it."

"You *will* be jokin', mum," said Bob, looking up with a laughing face; "I see'd you was a pleasant lady when I fust come to the winder."

“Well, put it me out,” said Mrs. Glegg, peremptorily.

“But if I let you have it for ten shillin’, mum, you’ll be so good as not tell nobody. I should be a laughin’-stock—the trade ’ud hoot me, if they knowed it. I’m obliged to make believe as I ask more nor I do for my goods, else they’d find out I was a flat. I’m glad you don’t insist upo’ buyin’ the net, for then I should ha’ lost my two best bargains for Mrs. Pepper o’ Fibb’s End—an’ she’s a rare customer.”

“Let me look at the net again,” said Mrs. Glegg, yearning after the cheap spots and sprigs, now they were vanishing.

“Well, I can’t deny *you*, mum,” said Bob, handing it out. “Eh! see what a pattern now! Real Laceham goods. Now, this is the sort o’ article I’m recommendin’ Mr. Tom to send out. Lors, it’s a fine thing for anybody as has got a bit o’ money—these Laceham goods ’ud make it breed like maggits. If I was a lady wi’ a bit o’ money!—why, I know one as put thirty pound into them goods—a lady wi’ a cork leg; but as sharp—you wouldn’t catch *her* runnin’ her head into a sack: *she*’d see her way clear out o’ anything afore she’d be in a hurry to start. Well, she let out thirty pound to a young man in the drapering line, and he laid it out i’ Laceham goods, an’ a shupercargo o’ my acquinetance (not Salt) took ’em out, an’ she got her eight per zent fust go off—an’ now you can’t hold her but she must be sendin’ out carguies wi’ every ship, till she’s gettin’ as rich as a Jew. Bucks her name is—she doesn’t live i’ this town. Now then, mum, if you’ll please to give me the net.…”

“Here’s fifteen shilling, then, for the two,” said Mrs. Glegg. “But it’s a shameful price.”

“Nay, mum, you’ll niver say that when you’re upo’ your knees i’ church i’ five years’ time. I’m makin’ you a present o’ th’ articles—I am, indeed. That eightpence shaves off my profit as clean as a razor. Now then, sir,” continued Bob, shouldering his pack, “if you please, I’ll be glad to go and see about makin’ Mr. Tom’s fortin. Eh, I wish I’d got another twenty pound to lay out for *my*sen: I shouldn’t stay to say my Catechism afore I knowed what to do wi’t.”

“Stop a bit, Mr. Glegg,” said the lady, as her husband took his hat, “you never *will* give me the chance o’ speaking. You’ll go away now, and finish everything about this business, and come back and tell me it’s too late for me to speak. As if I wasn’t my nephey’s own aunt, and th’ head o’ the family on his mother’s side! and laid by guineas, all full weight, for him—as he’ll know who to respect when I’m laid in my coffin.”

“Well, Mrs. G., say what you mean,” said Mr. G., hastily.

“Well, then, I desire as nothing may be done without my knowing. I don’t say as I shan’t venture twenty pounds, if you make out as everything’s right and safe. And if I do, Tom,” concluded Mrs. Glegg, turning impressively to her nephew, “I hope you’ll allays bear it in mind and be grateful for such an aunt. I mean you to pay me interest, you know—I don’t approve o’ giving; we niver looked for that in *my* family.”

“Thank you, aunt,” said Tom, rather proudly. “I prefer having the money only lent to me.”

“Very well: that’s the Dodson sperrit,” said Mrs. Glegg, rising to get her knitting with the sense that any further remark after this would be bathos.

Salt—that eminently “briny chap”—having been discovered in a cloud of tobacco-smoke at the Anchor Tavern, Mr. Glegg commenced inquiries which turned out satisfactorily enough to warrant the advance of the “nest-egg,” to which aunt Glegg contributed twenty pounds; and in this modest beginning you see the ground of a fact which might otherwise surprise you—namely, Tom’s accumulation of a fund, unknown to his father, that promised in no very long time to meet the more tardy process of saving, and quite cover the deficit. When once his attention had been turned to this source of gain, Tom determined to make the most of it, and lost no opportunity of obtaining information and extending his small enterprises. In not telling his father, he was influenced by that strange mixture of opposite feelings which often gives equal truth to those who blame an action and those who admire it: partly, it was

that disinclination to confidence which is seen between near kindred —that family repulsion which spoils the most sacred relations of our lives; partly, it was the desire to surprise his father with a great joy. He did not see that it would have been better to soothe the interval with a new hope, and prevent the delirium of a too sudden elation.

At the time of Maggie's first meeting with Philip, Tom had already nearly a hundred and fifty pounds of his own capital; and while they were walking by the evening-light in the Red Deeps, he, by the same evening light, was riding into Laceham, proud of being on his first journey on behalf of Guest & Co., and revolving in his mind all the chances that by the end of another year he should have doubled his gains, lifted off the obloquy of debt from his father's name, and perhaps—for he should be twenty-one—have got a new start for himself, on a higher platform of employment. Did he not deserve it? He was quite sure that he did.

CHAPTER III

The Wavering Balance

I said that Maggie went home that evening from the Red Deeps with a mental conflict already begun. You have seen clearly enough, in her interview with Philip, what that conflict was. Here suddenly was an opening in the rocky wall which shut in the narrow valley of humiliation, where all her prospect was the remote un-fathomed sky; and some of the memory-haunting earthly delights were no longer out of her reach. She might have books, converse, affection—she might hear tidings of the world from which her mind had not yet lost its sense of exile; and it would be a kindness to Philip too, who was pitiable—clearly not happy; and perhaps here was an opportunity indicated for making her mind more worthy of its highest service—perhaps the noblest, completest devoutness could hardly exist without some width of knowledge: *must* she always live in this resigned imprisonment? It was so blameless, so good a thing that there should be friendship between her and Philip; the motives that forbade it were so unreasonable—so unchristian! But the severe monotonous warning came again and again—that she was losing the simplicity and clearness of her life by admitting a ground of concealment, and that, by forsaking the simple rule of renunciation, she was throwing herself under the seductive guidance of illimitable wants. She thought she had won strength to obey the warning before she allowed herself the next week to turn her steps in the evening to the Red Deeps. But while she was resolved to say an affectionate farewell to Philip, how she looked forward to that evening walk in the still, fleckered shade of the hollows, away from all that was harsh and unlovely; to the affectionate admiring looks that would meet her; to the sense of comradeship that childish memories would give to wiser, older talk; to the certainty that Philip would care to hear everything she said, which no one else cared for! It was a half-hour that it would be very hard to turn her back upon,

with the sense that there would be no other like it. Yet she said what she meant to say; she looked firm as well as sad.

“Philip, I have made up my mind—it is right that we should give each other up, in everything but memory. I could not see you without concealment—stay, I know what you are going to say—it is other people’s wrong feelings that make concealment necessary; but concealment is bad, however it may be caused. I feel that it would be bad for me, for us both. And then, if our secret were discovered, there would be nothing but misery—dreadful anger; and then we must part after all, and it would be harder, when we were used to seeing each other.”

Philip’s face had flushed, and there was a momentary eagerness of expression, as if he had been about to resist this decision with all his might. But he controlled himself, and said, with assumed calmness, “Well, Maggie, if we must part, let us try and forget it for one half-hour: let us talk together a little while—for the last time.”

He took her hand, and Maggie felt no reason to withdraw it: his quietness made her all the more sure she had given him great pain, and she wanted to show him how unwillingly she had given it. They walked together hand in hand in silence.

“Let us sit down in the hollow,” said Philip, “where we stood the last time. See how the dog-roses have strewed the ground, and spread their opal petals over it!”

They sat down at the roots of the slanting ash.

“I’ve begun my picture of you among the Scotch firs, Maggie,” said Philip, “so you must let me study your face a little, while you stay—since I am not to see it again. Please, turn your head this way.”

This was said in an entreating voice, and it would have been very hard of Maggie to refuse. The full lustrous face, with the bright black coronet, looked down like that of a divinity well pleased to be worshipped, on the pale-hued, small-featured face that was turned up to it.

“I shall be sitting for my second portrait then,” she said, smiling. “Will it be larger than the other?”

“O yes, much larger. It is an oil-painting. You will look like a tall Hamadryad, dark and strong and noble, just issued from one of the fir-trees, when the stems are casting their afternoon shadows on the grass.”

“You seem to think more of painting than of anything now, Philip?”

“Perhaps I do,” said Philip, rather sadly; “but I think of too many things—sow all sorts of seeds, and get no great harvest from any one of them. I’m cursed with susceptibility in every direction, and effective faculty in none. I care for painting and music; I care for classic literature, and mediœval literature, and modern literature: I flutter all ways, and fly in none.”

“But surely that is a happiness to have so many tastes—to enjoy so many beautiful things—when they are within your reach,” said Maggie, musingly. “It always seemed to me a sort of clever stupidity only to have one sort of talent—almost like a carrier-pigeon.”

“It might be a happiness to have many tastes if I were like other men,” said Philip, bitterly. “I might get some power and distinction by mere mediocrity, as they do; at least I should get those middling satisfactions which make men contented to do without great ones. I might think society at St. Ogg’s agreeable then. But nothing could make life worth the purchase-money of pain to me, but some faculty that would lift me above the dead level of provincial existence. Yes—there is one thing: a passion answers as well as a faculty.”

Maggie did not hear the last words: she was struggling against the consciousness that Philip’s words had set her own discontent vibrating again as it used to do.

“I understand what you mean,” she said, “though I know so much less than you do. I used to think I could never bear life if it kept on being the same every day, and I must always be doing things of no consequence, and never know anything greater. But, dear Philip, I think we are only like children, that some one who is wiser is taking

care of. Is it not right to resign ourselves entirely, whatever may be denied us? I have found great peace in that for the last two or three years—even joy in subduing my own will."

"Yes, Maggie," said Philip, vehemently; "and you are shutting yourself up in a narrow self-delusive fanaticism, which is only a way of escaping pain by starving into dulness all the highest powers of your nature. Joy and peace are not resignation: resignation is the willing endurance of a pain that is not allayed—that you don't expect to be allayed. Stupefaction is not resignation: and it is stupefaction to remain in ignorance—to shut up all the avenues by which the life of your fellow-men might become known to you. I am not resigned: I am not sure that life is long enough to learn that lesson. *You* are not resigned: you are only trying to stupefy yourself."

Maggie's lips trembled; she felt there was some truth in what Philip said, and yet there was a deeper consciousness that, for any immediate application it had to her conduct, it was no better than falsity. Her double impression corresponded to the double impulse of the speaker. Philip seriously believed what he said, but he said it with vehemence because it made an argument against the resolution that opposed his wishes. But Maggie's face, made more childlike by the gathering tears, touched him with a tenderer, less egoistic feeling. He took her hand and said gently—

"Don't let us think of such things in this short half-hour, Maggie. Let us only care about being together.… We shall be friends in spite of separation.… We shall always think of each other. I shall be glad to live as long as you are alive, because I shall think there may always come a time when I can—when you will let me help you in some way."

"What a dear, good brother you would have been, Philip," said Maggie, smiling through the haze of tears. "I think you would have made as much fuss about me, and been as pleased for me to love you, as would have satisfied even me. You would have loved me well enough to bear with me, and forgive me everything. That was what I always longed that Tom should do. I was never satisfied with

a *little* of anything. That is why it is better for me to do without earthly happiness altogether.… I never felt that I had enough music —I wanted more instruments playing together—I wanted voices to be fuller and deeper. Do you ever sing now, Philip?" she added abruptly, as if she had forgotten what went before.

"Yes," he said, "every day, almost. But my voice is only middling —like everything else in me."

"O sing me something—just one song. I *may* listen to that before I go—something you used to sing at Lorton on a Saturday afternoon, when we had the drawing-room all to ourselves, and I put my apron over my head to listen."

"*I* know," said Philip, and Maggie buried her face in her hands, while he sang *sotto voce*, "Love in her eyes sits playing;" and then said, "That's it, isn't it?"

"O no, I won't stay," said Maggie, starting up. "It will only haunt me. Let us walk, Philip. I must go home."

She moved away, so that he was obliged to rise and follow her.

"Maggie," he said, in a tone of remonstrance, "don't persist in this wilful, senseless privation. It makes me wretched to see you benumbing and cramping your nature in this way. You were so full of life when you were a child: I thought you would be a brilliant woman—all wit and bright imagination. And it flashes out in your face still, until you draw that veil of dull quiescence over it."

"Why do you speak so bitterly to me, Philip?" said Maggie.

"Because I foresee it will not end well: you can never carry on this self-torture."

"I shall have strength given me," said Maggie, tremulously.

"No, you will not, Maggie: no one has strength given to do what is unnatural. It is mere cowardice to seek safety in negations. No character becomes strong in that way. You will be thrown into the world some day, and then every rational satisfaction of your nature that you deny now, will assault you like a savage appetite."

Maggie started and paused, looking at Philip with alarm in her face.

“Philip, how dare you shake me in this way? You are a tempter.”

“No, I am not; but love gives insight, Maggie, and insight often gives foreboding. *Listen* to me—*let* me supply you with books; do let me see you sometimes—be your brother and teacher, as you said at Lorton. It is less wrong that you should see me than that you should be committing this long suicide.”

Maggie felt unable to speak. She shook her head and walked on in silence, till they came to the end of the Scotch firs, and she put out her hand in sign of parting.

“Do you banish me from this place for ever, then, Maggie? Surely I may come and walk in it sometimes? If I meet you by chance, there is no concealment in that?”

It is the moment when our resolution seems about to become irrevocable—when the fatal iron gates are about to close upon us—that tests our strength. Then, after hours of clear reasoning and firm conviction, we snatch at any sophistry that will nullify our long struggles, and bring us the defeat that we love better than victory.

Maggie felt her heart leap at this subterfuge of Philip’s, and there passed over her face that almost imperceptible shock which accompanies any relief. He saw it, and they parted in silence.

Philip’s sense of the situation was too complete for him not to be visited with glancing fears lest he had been intervening too presumptuously in the action of Maggie’s conscience—perhaps for a selfish end. But no!—he persuaded himself his end was not selfish. He had little hope that Maggie would ever return the strong feeling he had for her; and it must be better for Maggie’s future life, when these petty family obstacles to her freedom had disappeared, that the present should not be entirely sacrificed, and that she should have some opportunity of culture—some interchange with a mind above the vulgar level of those she was now condemned to live with. If we only look far enough off for the consequence of our actions, we can always find some point in the combination of results

by which those actions can be justified: by adopting the point of view of a Providence who arranges results, or of a philosopher who traces them, we shall find it possible to obtain perfect complacency in choosing to do what is most agreeable to us in the present moment. And it was in this way that Philip justified his subtle efforts to overcome Maggie's true prompting against a concealment that would introduce doubleness into her own mind, and might cause new misery to those who had the primary natural claim on her. But there was a surplus of passion in him that made him half independent of justifying motives. His longing to see Maggie, and make an element in her life, had in it some of that savage impulse to snatch an offered joy, which springs from a life in which the mental and bodily constitution have made pain predominate. He had not his full share in the common good of men: he could not even pass muster with the insignificant, but must be singled out for pity, and excepted from what was a matter of course with others. Even to Maggie he was an exception: it was clear that the thought of his being her lover had never entered her mind.

Do not think too hardly of Philip. Ugly and deformed people have great need of unusual virtues, because they are likely to be extremely uncomfortable without them: but the theory that unusual virtues spring by a direct consequence out of personal disadvantages, as animals get thicker wool in severe climates, is perhaps a little overstrained. The temptations of beauty are much dwelt upon, but I fancy they only bear the same relation to those of ugliness, as the temptation to excess at a feast, where the delights are varied for eye and ear as well as palate, bears to the temptations that assail the desperation of hunger. Does not the Hunger Tower stand as the type of the utmost trial to what is human in us?

Philip had never been soothed by that mother's love which flows out to us in the greater abundance because our need is greater, which clings to us the more tenderly because we are the less likely to be winners in the game of life; and the sense of his father's affection and indulgence towards him was marred by the keener perception of his father's faults. Kept aloof from all practical life as

Philip had been, and by nature half feminine in sensitiveness, he had some of the woman's intolerant repulsion towards worldliness and the deliberate pursuit of sensual enjoyment; and this one strong natural tie in his life—his relation as a son—was like an aching limb to him. Perhaps there is inevitably something morbid in a human being who is in any way unfavourably excepted from ordinary conditions, until the good force has had time to triumph; and it has rarely had time for that at two-and-twenty. That force was present in Philip in much strength, but the sun himself looks feeble through the morning mists.

CHAPTER IV

Another Love-scene

Early in the following April, nearly a year after that dubious parting you have just witnessed, you may, if you like, again see Maggie entering the Red Deeps through the group of Scotch firs. But it is early afternoon and not evening, and the edge of sharpness in the spring air makes her draw her large shawl close about her and trip along rather quickly; though she looks round, as usual, that she may take in the sight of her beloved trees. There is a more eager, inquiring look in her eyes than there was last June, and a smile is hovering about her lips, as if some playful speech were awaiting the right hearer. The hearer was not long in appearing.

"Take back your *Corinne,"* said Maggie, drawing a book from under her shawl. "You were right in telling me she would do me no good; but you were wrong in thinking I should wish to be like her."

"Wouldn't you really like to be a tenth Muse, then, Maggie?" said Philip, looking up in her face as we look at a first parting in the clouds that promises us a bright heaven once more.

"Not at all," said Maggie, laughing. "The Muses were uncomfortable goddesses, I think—obliged always to carry rolls and musical instruments about with them. If I carried a harp in this climate, you know, I must have a green baise cover for it—and I should be sure to leave it behind me by mistake."

"You agree with me in not liking Corinne, then?"

"I didn't finish the book," said Maggie. "As soon as I came to the blond-haired young lady reading in the park, I shut it up, and determined to read no further. I foresaw that that light-complexioned girl would win away all the love from Corinne and make her miserable. I'm determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness. I should

begin to have a prejudice against them. If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance. I want to avenge Rebecca and Flora MacIvor, and Minna and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones. Since you are my tutor, you ought to preserve my mind from prejudices—you are always arguing against prejudices."

"Well, perhaps you will avenge the dark women in your own person, and carry away all the love from your cousin Lucy. She is sure to have some handsome young man of St. Ogg's at her feet now: and you have only to shine upon him—your fair little cousin will be quite quenched in your beams."

"Philip, that is not pretty of you, to apply my nonsense to anything real," said Maggie, looking hurt. "As if I, with my old gowns and want of all accomplishments, could be a rival of dear little Lucy, who knows and does all sorts of charming things, and is ten times prettier than I am—even if I were odious and base enough to wish to be her rival. Besides, I never go to aunt Deane's when any one is there: it is only because dear Lucy is good, and loves me, that she comes to see me, and will have me go to see her sometimes."

"Maggie," said Philip, with surprise, "it is not like you to take playfulness literally. You must have been in St. Ogg's this morning, and brought away a slight infection of dulness."

"Well," said Maggie, smiling, "if you meant that for a joke, it was a poor one; but I thought it was a very good reproof. I thought you wanted to remind me that I am vain, and wish every one to admire me most. But it isn't for that, that I'm jealous for the dark women—not because I'm dark myself. It's because I always care the most about the unhappy people: if the blond girl were forsaken, I should like *her* best. I always take the side of the rejected lover in the stories."

"Then you would never have the heart to reject one yourself—should you, Maggie?" said Philip, flushing a little.

"I don't know," said Maggie, hesitatingly. Then with a bright smile—"I think perhaps I could if he were very conceited; and yet, if

he got extremely humiliated afterwards, I should relent."

"I've often wondered, Maggie," Philip said, with some effort, "whether you wouldn't really be more likely to love a man that other women were not likely to love."

"That would depend on what they didn't like him for," said Maggie, laughing. "He might be very disagreeable. He might look at me through an eye-glass stuck in his eye, making a hideous face, as young Torry does. I should think other women are not fond of that; but I never felt any pity for young Torry. I've never any pity for conceited people, because I think they carry their comfort about with them."

"But suppose, Maggie—suppose it was a man who was not conceited—who felt he had nothing to be conceited about—who had been marked from childhood for a peculiar kind of suffering—and to whom you were the day-star of his life—who loved you, worshipped you, so entirely that he felt it happiness enough for him if you would let him see you at rare moments…."

Philip paused with a pang of dread lest his confession should cut short this very happiness—a pang of the same dread that had kept his love mute through long months. A rush of self-consciousness told him that he was besotted to have said all this. Maggie's manner this morning had been as unconstrained and indifferent as ever.

But she was not looking indifferent now. Struck with the unusual emotion in Philip's tone, she had turned quickly to look at him, and as he went on speaking, a great change came over her face—a flush and slight spasm of the features such as we see in people who hear some news that will require them to readjust their conceptions of the past. She was quite silent, and, walking on towards the trunk of a fallen tree, she sat down, as if she had no strength to spare for her muscles. She was trembling.

"Maggie," said Philip, getting more and more alarmed in every fresh moment of silence, "I was a fool to say it—forget that I've said it. I shall be contented if things can be as they were."

The distress with which he spoke urged Maggie to say something. “I am so surprised, Philip—I had not thought of it.” And the effort to say this brought the tears down too.

“Has it made you hate me, Maggie?” said Philip, impetuously. “Do you think I’m a presumptuous fool?”

“O Philip!” said Maggie, “how can you think I have such feelings?—as if I were not grateful for *any* love. But.… but I had never thought of your being my lover. It seemed so far off—like a dream—only like one of the stories one imagines—that I should ever have a lover.”

“Then can you bear to think of me as your lover, Maggie?” said Philip, seating himself by her, and taking her hand, in the elation of a sudden hope. “Do you love me?”

Maggie turned rather pale: this direct question seemed not easy to answer. But her eyes met Philip’s, which were in this moment liquid and beautiful with beseeching love. She spoke with hesitation, yet with sweet, simple, girlish tenderness.

“I think I could hardly love any one better: there is nothing but what I love you for.” She paused a little while, and then added, “But it will be better for us not to say any more about it—won’t it, dear Philip? You know we couldn’t even be friends, if our friendship were discovered. I have never felt that I was right in giving way about seeing you—though it has been so precious to me in some ways; and now the fear comes upon me strongly again, that it will lead to evil.”

“But no evil has come, Maggie; and if you had been guided by that fear before, you would only have lived through another dreary benumbing year, instead of reviving into your real self.”

Maggie shook her head. “It has been very sweet, I know—all the talking together, and the books, and the feeling that I had the walk to look forward to, when I could tell you the thoughts that had come into my head while I was away from you. But it has made me restless: it has made me think a great deal about the world; and I have impatient thoughts again—I get weary of my home—and then

it cuts me to the heart afterwards, that I should ever have felt weary of my father and mother. I think what you call being benumbed was better—better for me—for then my selfish desires were benumbed."

Philip had risen again, and was walking backwards and forwards impatiently.

"No, Maggie, you have wrong ideas of self-conquest, as I've often told you. What you call self-conquest—blinding and deafening yourself to all but one train of impressions—is only the culture of monomania in a nature like yours."

He had spoken with some irritation, but now he sat down by her again, and took her hand.

"Don't think of the past now, Maggie; think only of our love. If you can really cling to me with all your heart, every obstacle will be overcome in time: we need only wait. I can live on hope. Look at me, Maggie; tell me again, it is possible for you to love me. Don't look away from me to that cloven tree; it is a bad omen."

She turned her large dark glance upon him with a sad smile.

"Come, Maggie, say one kind word, or else you were better to me at Lorton. You asked me if I should like you to kiss me—don't you remember?—and you promised to kiss me when you met me again. You never kept the promise."

The recollection of that childish time came as a sweet relief to Maggie. It made the present moment less strange to her. She kissed him almost as simply and quietly as she had done when she was twelve years old. Philip's eyes flashed with delight, but his next words were words of discontent.

"You don't seem happy enough, Maggie: you are forcing yourself to say you love me, out of pity."

"No, Philip," said Maggie, shaking her head, in her old childish way; "I'm telling you the truth. It is all new and strange to me; but I don't think I could love any one better than I love you. I should like always to live with you—to make you happy. I have always been happy when I have been with you. There is only one thing I will not

do for your sake: I will never do anything to wound my father. You must never ask that from me."

"No, Maggie: I will ask nothing—I will bear everything—I'll wait another year only for a kiss, if you will only give me the first place in your heart."

"No," said Maggie, smiling, "I won't make you wait so long as that." But then, looking serious again, she added, as she rose from her seat—

"But what would your own father say, Philip? O, it is quite impossible we can ever be more than friends—brother and sister in secret, as we have been. Let us give up thinking of everything else."

"No, Maggie, I can't give you up—unless you are deceiving me—unless you really only care for me as if I were your brother. Tell me the truth."

"Indeed, I do, Philip. What happiness have I ever had so great as being with you?—since I was a little girl—the days Tom was good to me. And your mind is a sort of world to me: you can tell me all I want to know. I think I should never be tired of being with you."

They were walking hand in hand, looking at each other; Maggie, indeed, was hurrying along, for she felt it time to be gone. But the sense that their parting was near, made her more anxious lest she should have unintentionally left some painful impression on Philip's mind. It was one of those dangerous moments when speech is at once sincere and deceptive—when feeling, rising high above its average depth, leaves flood-marks which are never reached again.

They stopped to part among the Scotch firs.

"Then my life will be filled with hope, Maggie—and I shall be happier than other men, in spite of all? We *do* belong to each other—for always—whether we are apart or together?"

"Yes, Philip: I should like never to part: I should like to make your life very happy."

"I am waiting for something else—I wonder whether it will come."

Maggie smiled, with glistening tears, and then stooped her tall head to kiss the pale face that was full of pleading, timid love—like a woman's.

She had a moment of real happiness then—a moment of belief that, if there were sacrifice in this love, it was all the richer and more satisfying.

She turned away and hurried home, feeling that in the hour since she had trodden this road before, a new era had begun for her. The tissue of vague dreams must now get narrower and narrower, and all the threads of thought and emotion be gradually absorbed in the woof of her actual daily life.

CHAPTER V

The Cloven Tree

Secrets are rarely betrayed or discovered according to any programme our fear has sketched out. Fear is almost always haunted by terrible dramatic scenes, which recur in spite of the best-argued probabilities against them; and during a year that Maggie had had the burthen of concealment on her mind, the possibility of discovery had continually presented itself under the form of a sudden meeting with her father or Tom when she was walking with Philip in the Red Deeps. She was aware that this was not one of the most likely events; but it was the scene that most completely symbolised her inward dread. Those slight indirect suggestions which are dependent on apparently trivial coincidences and incalculable states of mind, are the favourite machinery of Fact, but are not the stuff in which imagination is apt to work.

Certainly one of the persons about whom Maggie's fears were farthest from troubling themselves was her aunt Pullet, on whom, seeing that she did not live in St. Ogg's, and was neither sharp-eyed nor sharp-tempered, it would surely have been quite whimsical of them to fix rather than on aunt Glegg. And yet the channel of fatality—the pathway of the lightning—was no other than aunt Pullet. She did not live at St. Ogg's, but the road from Garum Firs lay by the Red Deeps, at the end opposite that by which Maggie entered.

The day after Maggie's last meeting with Philip, being a Sunday on which Mr. Pullet was bound to appear in funeral hat-band and scarf at St. Ogg's church, Mrs. Pullet made this the occasion of dining with sister Glegg, and taking tea with poor sister Tulliver. Sunday was the one day in the week on which Tom was at home in the afternoon; and to-day the brighter spirits he had been in of late had flowed over in unusually cheerful open chat with his father, and

in the invitation, “Come, Magsie, you come too!” when he strolled out with his mother in the garden to see the advancing cherry-blossoms. He had been better pleased with Maggie since she had been less odd and ascetic; he was even getting rather proud of her: several persons had remarked in his hearing that his sister was a very fine girl. To-day there was a peculiar brightness in her face, due in reality to an under-current of excitement, which had as much doubt and pain as pleasure in it; but it might pass for a sign of happiness.

“You look very well, my dear,” said aunt Pullet, shaking her head sadly, as they sat round the tea-table. “I niver thought your girl ’ud be so good-looking, Bessy. But you must wear pink, my dear: that blue thing as your aunt Glegg gave you turns you into a crowflower. Jane never *was* tasty. Why don’t you wear that gown o’ mine?”

“It is so pretty and so smart, aunt. I think it’s too showy for me—at least for my other clothes, that I must wear with it.”

“To be sure, it ’ud be unbecoming if it wasn’t well known you’ve got them belonging to you as can afford to give you such things when they’ve done with ’em themselves. It stands to reason I must give my own niece clothes now and then—such things as *I* buy every year, and never wear anything out. And as for Lucy, there’s no giving to her, for she’s got everything o’ the choicest: sister Deane may well hold her head up, though she looks dreadful yallow, poor thing—I doubt this liver complaint ’ull carry her off. That’s what this new vicar, this Dr. Kenn, said in the funeral sermon to-day.”

“Ah, he’s a wonderful preacher, by all account—isn’t he, Sophy?” said Mrs. Tulliver.

“Why, Lucy had got a collar on this blessed day,” continued Mrs. Pullet, with her eyes fixed in a ruminating manner, “as I don’t say I haven’t got as good, but I must look out my best to match it.”

“Miss Lucy’s called the bell o’ St. Ogg’s, they say: that’s a cur’ous word,” observed Mr. Pullet, on whom the mysteries of etymology sometimes fell with an oppressive weight.

“Pooh!” said Mr. Tulliver, jealous for Maggie, “she’s a small thing, not much of a figure. But fine feathers make fine birds. I see nothing to admire so much in those diminutive women; they look silly by the side o’ the men—out o’ proportion. When I chose my wife, I chose her the right size—neither too little nor too big.”

The poor wife, with her withered beauty, smiled complacently.

“But the men aren’t *all* big,” said uncle Pullet, not without some self-reference; “a young fellow may be good-looking and yet not be a six-foot, like Master Tom here.”

“Ah, it’s poor talking about littleness and bigness,—anybody may think it’s a mercy they’re straight,” said aunt Pullet. “There’s that mismade son o’ Lawyer Wakem’s—I saw him at church to-day. Dear, dear! to think o’ the property he’s like to have; and they say he’s very queer and lonely—doesn’t like much company. I shouldn’t wonder if he goes out of his mind; for we never come along the road but he’s a-scrambling out o’ the trees and brambles at the Red Deeps.”

This wide statement, by which Mrs. Pullet represented the fact that she had twice seen Philip at the spot indicated, produced an effect on Maggie which was all the stronger because Tom sate opposite her, and she was intensely anxious to look indifferent. At Philip’s name she had blushed, and the blush deepened every instant from consciousness, until the mention of the Red Deeps made her feel as if the whole secret were betrayed, and she dared not even hold her tea-spoon lest she should show how she trembled. She sat with her hands clasped under the table, not daring to look round. Happily, her father was seated on the same side with herself, beyond her uncle Pullet, and could not see her face without stooping forward. Her mother’s voice brought the first relief—turning the conversation; for Mrs. Tulliver was always alarmed when the name of Wakem was mentioned in her husband’s presence. Gradually Maggie recovered composure enough to look up; her eyes met Tom’s, but he turned away his head immediately; and she went to bed that night wondering if he had gathered any suspicion from her confusion. Perhaps not: perhaps he would think

it was only her alarm at her aunt's mention of Wakem before her father: that was the interpretation her mother had put on it. To her father, Wakem was like a disfiguring disease, of which he was obliged to endure the consciousness, but was exasperated to have the existence recognised by others; and no amount of sensitiveness in her about her father could be surprising, Maggie thought.

But Tom was too keen-sighted to rest satisfied with such an interpretation: he had seen clearly enough that there was something distinct from anxiety about her father in Maggie's excessive confusion. In trying to recall all the details that could give shape to his suspicions, he remembered only lately hearing his mother scold Maggie for walking in the Red Deeps when the ground was wet, and bringing home shoes clogged with red soil: still Tom, retaining all his old repulsion for Philip's deformity, shrank from attributing to his sister the probability of feeling more than a friendly interest in such an unfortunate exception to the common run of men. Tom's was a nature which had a sort of superstitious repugnance to everything exceptional. A love for a deformed man would be odious in any woman—in a sister intolerable. But if she had been carrying on any kind of intercourse whatever with Philip, a stop must be put to it at once: she was disobeying her father's strongest feelings and her brother's express commands, besides compromising herself by secret meetings. He left home the next morning in that watchful state of mind which turns the most ordinary course of things into pregnant coincidences.

That afternoon, about half-past three o'clock, Tom was standing on the wharf, talking with Bob Jakin about the probability of the good ship Adelaide coming in, in a day or two, with results highly important to both of them.

"Eh," said Bob, parenthetically, as he looked over the fields on the other side of the river, "there goes that crooked young Wakem. I know him or his shadder as far off as I can see 'em; I'm allays lighting on him o' that side the river."

A sudden thought seemed to have darted through Tom's mind. "I must go, Bob," he said, "I've something to attend to," hurrying off to

the warehouse, where he left notice for some one to take his place—he was called away home on peremptory business.

The swiftest pace and the shortest road took him to the gate, and he was pausing to open it deliberately, that he might walk into the house with an appearance of perfect composure, when Maggie came out at the front door in bonnet and shawl. His conjecture was fulfilled, and he waited for her at the gate. She started violently when she saw him.

“Tom, how is it you are come home? Is there anything the matter?” Maggie spoke in a low tremulous voice.

“I’m come to walk with you to the Red Deeps and meet Philip Wakem,” said Tom, the central fold in his brow, which had become habitual with him, deepening as he spoke.

Maggie stood helpless—pale and cold. By some means, then, Tom knew everything. At last she said, “I’m not going,” and turned round.

“Yes, you are; but I want to speak to you first. Where is my father?”

“Out on horseback.”

“And my mother?”

“In the yard, I think, with the poultry.”

“I can go in, then, without her seeing me?”

They walked in together, and Tom, entering the parlour, said to Maggie, “Come in here.”

She obeyed, and he closed the door behind her.

“Now, Maggie, tell me this instant everything that has passed between you and Philip Wakem.”

“Does my father know anything?” said Maggie, still trembling.

“No,” said Tom, indignantly. “But he *shall* know, if you attempt to use deceit towards me any further.”

“I don’t wish to use deceit,” said Maggie, flushing into resentment at hearing this word applied to her conduct.

“Tell me the whole truth then.”

“Perhaps you know it.”

“Never mind whether I know it or not. Tell me exactly what has happened, or my father shall know everything.”

“I tell it for my father’s sake, then.”

“Yes, it becomes you to profess affection for your father, when you have despised his strongest feelings.”

“You never do wrong, Tom,” said Maggie, tauntingly.

“Not if I know it,” answered Tom, with proud sincerity. “But I have nothing to say to you, beyond this: tell me what has passed between you and Philip Wakem. When did you first meet him in the Red Deeps?”

“A year ago,” said Maggie, quietly. Tom’s severity gave her a certain fund of defiance, and kept her sense of error in abeyance. “You need ask me no more questions. We have been friendly a year. We have met and walked together often. He has lent me books.”

“Is that all?” said Tom, looking straight at her with his frown.

Maggie paused a moment; then, determined to make an end of Tom’s right to accuse her of deceit, she said, haughtily—

“No, not quite all. On Saturday he told me that he loved me. I didn’t think of it before then—I had only thought of him as an old friend.”

“And you *encouraged* him?” said Tom, with an expression of disgust.

“I told him that I loved him too.”

Tom was silent a few moments, looking on the ground and frowning, with his hands in his pockets. At last, he looked up, and said, coldly—

“Now, then, Maggie, there are but two courses for you to take; either you vow solemnly to me, with your hand on my father’s Bible, that you will never have another meeting or speak another word in private with Philip Wakem, or you refuse, and I tell my

father everything; and this month, when by my exertions he might be made happy once more, you will cause him the blow of knowing that you are a disobedient, deceitful daughter, who throws away her own respectability by clandestine meetings with the son of a man that has helped to ruin her father. Choose!" Tom ended with cold decision, going up to the large Bible, drawing it forward, and opening it at the fly-leaf, where the writing was.

It was a crushing alternative to Maggie.

"Tom," she said, urged out of pride into pleading, "don't ask me that. I will promise you to give up all intercourse with Philip, if you will let me see him once, or even only write to him and explain everything—to give it up as long as it would ever cause any pain to my father … I feel something for Philip too. *He* is not happy."

"I don't wish to hear anything of your feelings; I have said exactly what I mean: choose—and quickly, lest my mother should come in."

"If I give you my word, that will be as strong a bond to me as if I laid my hand on the Bible. I don't require that to bind me."

"Do what *I* require," said Tom. "I can't trust you, Maggie. There is no consistency in you. Put your hand on this Bible, and say, 'I renounce all private speech and intercourse with Philip Wakem from this time forth.' Else you will bring shame on us all, and grief on my father; and what is the use of my exerting myself and giving up everything else for the sake of paying my father's debts, if you are to bring madness and vexation on him, just when he might be easy and hold up his head once more?"

"O Tom—*will* the debts be paid soon?" said Maggie, clasping her hands, with a sudden flash of joy across her wretchedness.

"If things turn out as I expect," said Tom. "But," he added, his voice trembling with indignation, "while I have been contriving and working that my father may have some peace of mind before he dies —working for the respectability of our family—you have done all you can to destroy both."

Maggie felt a deep movement of compunction: for the moment, her mind ceased to contend against what she felt to be cruel and

unreasonable, and in her self-blame she justified her brother.

“Tom,” she said, in a low voice, “it was wrong of me—but I was so lonely—and I was sorry for Philip. And I think enmity and hatred are wicked.”

“Nonsense!” said Tom. “Your duty was clear enough. Say no more; but promise, in the words I told you.”

“I *must* speak to Philip once more.”

“You will go with me now and speak to him.”

“I give you my word not to meet him or write to him again without your knowledge. That is the only thing I will say. I will put my hand on the Bible if you like.”

“Say it, then.”

Maggie laid her hand on the page of manuscript and repeated the promise. Tom closed the book, and said, “Now, let us go.”

Not a word was spoken as they walked along. Maggie was suffering in anticipation of what Philip was about to suffer, and dreading the galling words that would fall on him from Tom’s lips; but she felt it was in vain to attempt anything but submission. Tom had his terrible clutch on her conscience and her deepest dread: she writhed under the demonstrable truth of the character he had given to her conduct, and yet her whole soul rebelled against it as unfair from its incompleteness. He, meanwhile, felt the impetus of his indignation diverted towards Philip. He did not know how much of an old boyish repulsion and of mere personal pride and animosity was concerned in the bitter severity of the words by which he meant to do the duty of a son and a brother. Tom was not given to inquire subtly into his own motives, any more than into other matters of an intangible kind; he was quite sure that his own motives as well as actions were good, else he would have had nothing to do with them.

Maggie’s only hope was that something might, for the first time, have prevented Philip from coming. Then there would be delay—then she might get Tom’s permission to write to him. Her heart beat with double violence when they got under the Scotch firs. It was the

last moment of suspense, she thought; Philip always met her soon after she got beyond them. But they passed across the more open green space, and entered the narrow bushy path by the mound. Another turning, and they came so close upon him that both Tom and Philip stopped suddenly within a yard of each other. There was a moment's silence, in which Philip darted a look of inquiry at Maggie's face. He saw an answer there, in the pale parted lips, and the terrified tension of the large eyes. Her imagination, always rushing extravagantly beyond an immediate impression, saw her tall strong brother grasping the feeble Philip bodily, crushing him and trampling on him.

"Do you call this acting the part of a man and a gentleman, sir?" Tom said, in a voice of harsh scorn, as soon as Philip's eyes were turned on him again.

"What do you mean?" answered Philip, haughtily.

"Mean? Stand farther from me, lest I should lay hands on you, and I'll tell you what I mean. I mean, taking advantage of a young girl's foolishness and ignorance to get her to have secret meetings with you. I mean, daring to trifle with the respectability of a family that has a good and honest name to support."

"I deny that," interrupted Philip, impetuously. "I could never trifle with anything that affected your sister's happiness. She is dearer to me than she is to you; I honour her more than you can ever honour her; I would give up my life to her."

"Don't talk high-flown nonsense to me, sir! Do you mean to pretend that you didn't know it would be injurious to her to meet you here week after week? Do you pretend you had any right to make professions of love to her, even if you had been a fit husband for her, when neither her father nor your father would ever consent to a marriage between you? And *you—you* to try and worm yourself into the affections of a handsome girl who is not eighteen, and has been shut out from the world by her father's misfortunes! That's your crooked notion of honour, is it? I call it base treachery—I call

it taking advantage of circumstances to win what's too good for you —what you'd never get by fair means."

"It is manly of you to talk in this way to *me,"* said Philip, bitterly, his whole frame shaken by violent emotions. "Giants have an immemorial right to stupidity and insolent abuse. You are incapable even of understanding what I feel for your sister. I feel so much for her that I could even desire to be at friendship with *you."*

"I should be very sorry to understand your feelings," said Tom, with scorching contempt. "What I wish is that you should understand *me*—that I shall take care of *my* sister, and that if you dare to make the least attempt to come near her, or to write to her, or to keep the slightest hold on her mind, your puny, miserable body, that ought to have put some modesty into your mind, shall not protect you. I'll thrash you—I'll hold you up to public scorn. Who wouldn't laugh at the idea of *your* turning lover to a fine girl?"

"Tom, I will not bear it—I will listen no longer," Maggie burst out, in a convulsed voice.

"Stay, Maggie!" said Philip, making a strong effort to speak. Then, looking at Tom, "You have dragged your sister here, I suppose, that she may stand by while you threaten and insult me. These naturally seemed to you the right means to influence me. But you are mistaken. Let your sister speak. If she says she is bound to give me up, I shall abide by her wishes to the slightest word."

"It was for my father's sake, Philip," said Maggie, imploringly. "Tom threatens to tell my father—and he couldn't bear it: I have promised, I have vowed solemnly, that we will not have any intercourse without my brother's knowledge."

"It is enough, Maggie. *I* shall not change; but I wish you to hold yourself entirely free. But trust me—remember that I can never seek for anything but good to what belongs to you."

"Yes," said Tom, exasperated by this attitude of Philip's, "you can talk of seeking good for her and what belongs to her now: did you seek her good before?"

“I did—at some risk, perhaps. But I wished her to have a friend for life—who would cherish her, who would do her more justice than a coarse and narrow-minded brother, that she has always lavished her affections on.”

“Yes, my way of befriending her is different from yours; and I’ll tell you what is my way. I’ll save her from disobeying and disgracing her father: I’ll save her from throwing herself away on you—from making herself a laughing-stock—from being flouted by a man like *your* father, because she’s not good enough for his son. You know well enough what sort of justice and cherishing you were preparing for her. I’m not to be imposed upon by fine words: I can see what actions mean. Come away, Maggie.”

He seized Maggie’s right wrist as he spoke, and she put out her left hand. Philip clasped it an instant, with one eager look, and then hurried away.

Tom and Maggie walked on in silence for some yards. He was still holding her wrist tightly, as if he were compelling a culprit from the scene of action. At last Maggie, with a violent snatch, drew her hand away, and her pent-up, long-gathered irritation burst into utterance.

“Don’t suppose that I think you are right, Tom, or that I bow to your will. I despise the feelings you have shown in speaking to Philip: I detest your insulting unmanly allusions to his deformity. You have been reproaching other people all your life—you have been always sure you yourself are right: it is because you have not a mind large enough to see that there is anything better than your own conduct and your own petty aims.”

“Certainly,” said Tom, coolly. “I don’t see that your conduct is better, or your aims either. If your conduct, and Philip Wakem’s conduct, has been right, why are you ashamed of its being known? Answer me that. I know what I have aimed at in my conduct, and I’ve succeeded: pray, what good has your conduct brought to you or any one else?”

“I don’t want to defend myself,” said Maggie, still with vehemence: “I know I’ve been wrong—often, continually. But yet,

sometimes when I have done wrong, it has been because I have feelings that you would be the better for, if you had them. If *you* were in fault ever—if you had done anything very wrong, I should be sorry for the pain it brought you; I should not want punishment to be heaped on you. But you have always enjoyed punishing me—you have always been hard and cruel to me: even when I was a little girl, and always loved you better than any one else in the world, you would let me go crying to bed without forgiving me. You have no pity: you have no sense of your own imperfection and your own sins. It is a sin to be hard; it is not fitting for a mortal—for a Christian. You are nothing but a Pharisee. You thank God for nothing but your own virtues—you think they are great enough to win you everything else. You have not even a vision of feelings by the side of which your shining virtues are mere darkness!"

"Well," said Tom, with cold scorn, "if your feelings are so much better than mine, let me see you show them in some other way than by conduct that's likely to disgrace us all—than by ridiculous flights first into one extreme and then into another. Pray, how have you shown your love, that you talk of, either to me or my father? By disobeying and deceiving us. I have a different way of showing my affection."

"Because you are a man, Tom, and have power, and can do something in the world."

"Then, if you can do nothing, submit to those that can."

"So I *will* submit to what I acknowledge and feel to be right. I will submit even to what is unreasonable from my father, but I will not submit to it from you. You boast of your virtues as if they purchased you a right to be cruel and unmanly as you've been to-day. Don't suppose I would give up Philip Wakem in obedience to you. The deformity you insult would make me cling to him and care for him the more."

"Very well—that is your view of things," said Tom, more coldly than ever; "you need say no more to show me what a wide distance there is between us. Let us remember that in future, and be silent."

Tom went back to St. Ogg's, to fulfil an appointment with his uncle Deane, and receive directions about a journey on which he was to set out the next morning.

Maggie went up to her own room to pour out all that indignant remonstrance, against which Tom's mind was close barred, in bitter tears. Then, when the first burst of unsatisfied anger was gone by, came the recollection of that quiet time before the pleasure which had ended in to-day's misery had perturbed the clearness and simplicity of her life. She used to think in that time that she had made great conquests, and won a lasting stand on serene heights above worldly temptations and conflict. And here she was down again in the thick of a hot strife with her own and others' passions. Life was not so short, then, and perfect rest was not so near as she had dreamed when she was two years younger. There was more struggle for her—perhaps more falling. If she had felt that she was entirely wrong, and that Tom had been entirely right, she could sooner have recovered more inward harmony; but now her penitence and submission were constantly obstructed by resentment that would present itself to her no otherwise than as a just indignation. Her heart bled for Philip: she went on recalling the insults that had been flung at him with so vivid a conception of what he had felt under them, that it was almost like a sharp bodily pain to her, making her beat the floor with her foot, and tighten her fingers on her palm.

And yet, how was it that she was now and then conscious of a certain dim background of relief in the forced separation from Philip? Surely it was only because the sense of a deliverance from concealment was welcome at any cost.

CHAPTER VI

The Hard-won Triumph

Three weeks later, when Dorlcote Mill was at its prettiest moment in all the year—the great chestnuts in blossom, and the grass all deep and daisied—Tom Tulliver came home to it earlier than usual in the evening, and as he passed over the bridge, he looked with the old deep-rooted affection at the respectable red brick house, which always seemed cheerful and inviting outside, let the rooms be as bare and the hearts as sad as they might, inside. There is a very pleasant light in Tom's blue-grey eyes as he glances at the house-windows: that fold in his brow never disappears, but it is not unbecoming; it seems to imply a strength of will that may possibly be without harshness, when the eyes and mouth have their gentlest expression. His firm step becomes quicker, and the corners of his mouth rebel against the compression which is meant to forbid a smile.

The eyes in the parlour were not turned towards the bridge just then, and the group there was sitting in unexpectant silence—Mr. Tulliver in his arm-chair, tired with a long ride, and ruminating with a worn look, fixed chiefly on Maggie, who was bending over her sewing while her mother was making the tea.

They all looked up with surprise when they heard the well-known foot.

"Why, what's up now, Tom?" said his father. "You're a bit earlier than usual."

"O, there was nothing more for me to do, so I came away. Well, mother!"

Tom went up to his mother and kissed her, a sign of unusual good-humour with him. Hardly a word or look had passed between him and Maggie in all the three weeks; but his usual

incommunicative-ness at home prevented this from being noticeable to their parents.

“Father,” said Tom, when they had finished tea, “do you know exactly how much money there is in the tin box?”

“Only a hundred and ninety-three pound,” said Mr. Tulliver. “You’ve brought less o’ late—but young fellows like to have their own way with their money. Though I didn’t do as I liked before *I* was of age.” He spoke with rather timid discontent.

“Are you quite sure that’s the sum, father?” said Tom: “I wish you would take the trouble to fetch the tin box down. I think you have perhaps made a mistake.”

“How should I make a mistake?” said his father, sharply. “I’ve counted it often enough; but I can fetch it, if you won’t believe me.”

It was always an incident Mr. Tulliver liked, in his gloomy life, to fetch the tin box and count the money.

“Don’t go out of the room, mother,” said Tom, as he saw her moving when his father was gone up-stairs.

“And isn’t Maggie to go?” said Mrs. Tulliver; “because somebody must take away the things.”

“Just as she likes,” said Tom, indifferently.

That was a cutting word to Maggie. Her heart had leaped with the sudden conviction that Tom was going to tell their father the debts could be paid—and Tom would have let her be absent when that news was told! But she carried away the tray, and came back immediately. The feeling of injury on her own behalf could not predominate at that moment.

Tom drew to the corner of the table near his father when the tin box was set down and opened, and the red evening light falling on them made conspicuous the worn, sour gloom of the dark-eyed father and the suppressed joy in the face of the fair-complexioned son. The mother and Maggie sat at the other end of the table, the one in blank patience, the other in palpitating expectation.

Mr. Tulliver counted out the money, setting it in order on the table, and then said, glancing sharply at Tom—

"There now! you see I was right enough."

He paused, looking at the money with bitter despondency.

"There's more nor three hundred wanting—it'll be a fine while before *I* can save that. Losing that forty-two pound wi' the corn was a sore job. This world's been too many for me. It's took four year to lay *this* by—it's much if I'm above ground for another four year.... I must trusten to you to pay 'em," he went on, with a trembling voice, "if you keep i' the same mind now you're coming o' age.... But you're like enough to bury me first."

He looked up in Tom's face with a querulous desire for some assurance.

"No, father," said Tom, speaking with energetic decision, though there was tremor discernible in his voice too, "you will live to see the debts all paid. You shall pay them with your own hand."

His tone implied something more than mere hopefulness or resolution. A slight electric shock seemed to pass through Mr. Tulliver, and he kept his eyes fixed on Tom with a look of eager inquiry, while Maggie, unable to restrain herself, rushed to her father's side and knelt down by him. Tom was silent a little while before he went on.

"A good while ago, my uncle Glegg lent me a little money to trade with, and that has answered. I have three hundred and twenty pounds in the bank."

His mother's arms were round his neck as soon as the last words were uttered, and she said, half-crying—

"O, my boy, I knew you'd make iverything right again, when you got a man."

But his father was silent: the flood of emotion hemmed in all power of speech. Both Tom and Maggie were struck with fear lest the shock of joy might even be fatal. But the blessed relief of tears came. The broad chest heaved, the muscles of the face gave way,

and the grey-haired man burst into loud sobs. The fit of weeping gradually subsided, and he sat quiet, recovering the regularity of his breathing. At last he looked up at his wife and said, in a gentle tone —

"Bessy, you must come and kiss me now—the lad has made you amends. You'll see a bit o' comfort again, belike."

When she had kissed him, and he had held her hand a minute, his thoughts went back to the money.

"I wish you'd brought me the money to look at, Tom," he said, fingering the sovereigns on the table; "I should ha' felt surer."

"You shall see it to-morrow, father," said Tom. "My uncle Deane has appointed the creditors to meet to-morrow at the Golden Lion, and he has ordered a dinner for them at two o'clock. My uncle Glegg and he will both be there. It was advertised in the *Messenger* on Saturday."

"Then Wakem knows on't!" said Mr. Tulliver, his eye kindling with triumphant fire. "Ah!" he went on, with a long-drawn guttural enunciation, taking out his snuff-box, the only luxury he had left himself, and tapping it with something of his old air of defiance—" I'll get from under *his* thumb now—though I *must* leave th' old mill. I thought I could ha' held out to die here—but I can't.… We've got a glass o' nothing in the house, have we, Bessy?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Tulliver, drawing out her much-reduced bunch of keys, "there's some brandy sister Deane brought me when I was ill."

"Get it me, then, get it me. I feel a bit weak."

"Tom, my lad," he said, in a stronger voice, when he had taken some brandy-and-water, "you shall make a speech to 'em. I'll tell 'em it's you as got the best part o' the money. They'll see I'm honest at last, and ha' got an honest son. Ah! Wakem 'ud be fine and glad to have a son like mine—a fine straight fellow—i'stead o' that poor crooked creatur! You'll prosper i' the world, my lad; you'll maybe see the day when Wakem and his son 'ull be a round or two below you. You'll like enough be ta'en into partnership, as your uncle Deane was before you—you're in the right way for't; and then

there's nothing to hinder your getting rich.… And if ever you're rich enough—mind this—try and get th' old mill again."

Mr. Tulliver threw himself back in his chair: his mind, which had so long been the home of nothing but bitter discontent and foreboding, suddenly filled, by the magic of joy, with visions of good fortune. But some subtle influence prevented him from foreseeing the good fortune as happening to himself.

"Shake hands wi' me, my lad," he said, suddenly putting out his hand. "It's a great thing when a man can be proud as he's got a good son. I've had *that* luck."

Tom never lived to taste another moment so delicious as that; and Maggie couldn't help forgetting her own grievances. Tom *was* good; and in the sweet humility that springs in us all in moments of true admiration and gratitude, she felt that the faults he had to pardon in her had never been redeemed, as his faults were. She felt no jealousy this evening that, for the first time, she seemed to be thrown into the background in her father's mind.

There was much more talk before bed-time. Mr. Tulliver naturally wanted to hear all the particulars of Tom's trading adventures, and he listened with growing excitement and delight. He was curious to know what had been said on every occasion—if possible, what had been thought; and Bob Jakin's part in the business threw him into peculiar outbursts of sympathy with the triumphant knowingness of that remarkable packman. Bob's juvenile history, so far as it had come under Mr. Tulliver's knowledge, was recalled with that sense of astonishing promise it displayed, which is observable in all reminiscences of the childhood of great men.

It was well that there was this interest of narrative to keep under the vague but fierce sense of triumph over Wakem, which would otherwise have been the channel his joy would have rushed into with dangerous force. Even as it was, that feeling from time to time gave threats of its ultimate mastery, in sudden bursts of irrelevant exclamation.

It was long before Mr. Tulliver got to sleep that night, and the sleep, when it came, was filled with vivid dreams. At half-past five o'clock in the morning, when Mrs. Tulliver was already rising, he alarmed her by starting up with a sort of smothered shout, and looking round in a bewildered way at the walls of the bedroom.

"What's the matter, Mr. Tulliver?" said his wife. He looked at her, still with a puzzled expression, and said at last—

"Ah!—I was dreaming … did I make a noise?… I thought I'd got hold of him."

CHAPTER VII

A Day of Reckoning

Mr. Tulliver was an essentially sober man—able to take his glass and not averse to it, but never exceeding the bounds of moderation. He had naturally an active Hotspur temperament, which did not crave liquid fire to set it a-glow; his impetuosity was usually equal to an exciting occasion without any such reinforcements; and his desire for the brandy-and-water implied that the too sudden joy had fallen with a dangerous shock on a frame depressed by four years of gloom and unaccustomed hard fare. But that first doubtful tottering moment passed, he seemed to gather strength with his gathering excitement; and the next day, when he was seated at table with his creditors, his eye kindling and his cheek flushed with the consciousness that he was about to make an honourable figure once more, he looked more like the proud, confident, warm-hearted and warm-tempered Tulliver of old times, than might have seemed possible to any one who had met him a week before, riding along as had been his wont for the last four years since the sense of failure and debt had been upon him—with his head hanging down, casting brief, unwilling looks on those who forced themselves on his notice. He made his speech, asserting his honest principles with his old confident eagerness, alluding to the rascals and the luck that had been against him, but that he had triumphed over, to some extent, by hard efforts and the aid of a good son; and winding up with the story of how Tom had got the best part of the needful money. But the streak of irritation and hostile triumph seemed to melt for a little while into purer fatherly pride and pleasure, when, Tom's health having been proposed, and uncle Deane having taken occasion to say a few words of eulogy on his general character and conduct, Tom himself got up and made the single speech of his life. It could hardly have been briefer: he thanked the gentlemen for the honour they had done him. He was glad that he had been able to

help his father in proving his integrity and regaining his honest name; and, for his own part, he hoped he should never undo that work and disgrace that name. But the applause that followed was so great, and Tom looked so gentlemanly as well as tall and straight, that Mr. Tulliver remarked, in an explanatory manner, to his friends on his right and left, that he had spent a deal of money on his son's education.

The party broke up in very sober fashion at five o'clock. Tom remained in St. Ogg's to attend to some business, and Mr. Tulliver mounted his horse to go home, and describe the memorable things that had been said and done, to "poor Bessy and the little wench." The air of excitement that hung about him was but faintly due to good cheer or any stimulus but the potent wine of triumphant joy. He did not choose any back street to-day, but rode slowly, with uplifted head and free glances, along the principal street all the way to the bridge. Why did he not happen to meet Wakem? The want of that coincidence vexed him, and set his mind at work in an irritating way. Perhaps Wakem was gone out of town to-day on purpose to avoid seeing or hearing anything of an honourable action, which might well cause him some unpleasant twinges. If Wakem were to meet him then, Mr. Tulliver would look straight at him, and the rascal would perhaps be forsaken a little by his cool domineering impudence. He would know by-and-by that an honest man was not going to serve *him* any longer, and lend his honesty to fill a pocket already over-full of dishonest gains. Perhaps the luck was beginning to turn; perhaps the devil didn't always hold the best cards in this world.

Simmering in this way, Mr. Tulliver approached the yard-gates of Dorlcote Mill, near enough to see a well-known figure coming out of them on a fine black horse. They met about fifty yards from the gates, between the great chestnuts and elms and the high bank.

"Tulliver," said Wakem, abruptly, in a haughtier tone than usual, "what a fool's trick you did—spreading those hard lumps on that Far Close. I told you how it would be; but you men never learn to farm with any method."

“Oh!” said Tulliver, suddenly boiling up. “Get somebody else to farm for you, then, as ’ll ask *you* to teach him.”

“You have been drinking, I suppose,” said Wakem, really believing that this was the meaning of Tulliver’s flushed face and sparkling eyes.

“No, I’ve not been drinking,” said Tulliver; “I want no drinking to help me make up my mind as I’ll serve no longer under a scoundrel.”

“Very well! you may leave my premises to-morrow, then: hold your insolent tongue and let me pass.” (Tulliver was backing his horse across the road to hem Wakem in.)

“No, I *shan’t* let you pass,” said Tulliver, getting fiercer. “I shall tell you what I think of you first. You’re too big a raskill to get hanged—you’re.…”

“Let me pass, you ignorant brute, or I’ll ride over you.”

Mr. Tulliver, spurring his horse and raising his whip, made a rush forward, and Wakem’s horse, rearing and staggering backward, threw his rider from the saddle and sent him sideways on the ground. Wakem had had the presence of mind to loose the bridle at once, and as the horse only staggered a few paces and then stood still, he might have risen and remounted without more inconvenience than a bruise and a shake. But before he could rise, Tulliver was off his horse too. The sight of the long-hated predominant man down and in his power, threw him into a frenzy of triumphant vengeance, which seemed to give him preternatural agility and strength. He rushed on Wakem, who was in the act of trying to recover his feet, grasped him by the left arm so as to press Wakem’s whole weight on the right arm, which rested on the ground, and flogged him fiercely across the back with his riding-whip. Wakem shouted for help, but no help came, until a woman’s scream was heard, and the cry of “Father, father!”

Suddenly, Wakem felt, something had arrested Mr. Tulliver’s arm; for the flogging ceased, and the grasp on his own arm was relaxed.

“Get away with you—go!” said Tulliver, angrily. But it was not to Wakem that he spoke. Slowly the lawyer rose, and, as he turned his head, saw that Tulliver’s arms were being held by a girl—rather by the fear of hurting the girl that clung to him with all her young might.

“O Luke—mother—come and help Mr. Wakem!” Maggie cried, as she heard the longed-for footsteps.

“Help me on to that low horse,” said Wakem to Luke, “then I shall perhaps manage: though—confound it—I think this arm is sprained.”

With some difficulty, Wakem was heaved on to Tulliver’s horse. Then he turned toward the miller and said, with white rage, “You’ll suffer for this, sir. Your daughter is a witness that you’ve assaulted me.”

“I don’t care,” said Mr. Tulliver, in a thick, fierce voice; “go and show your back, and tell ’em I thrashed you. Tell ’em I’ve made things a bit more even i’ the world.”

“Ride my horse home with me,” said Wakem to Luke. “By the Tofton Ferry—not through the town.”

“Father, come in!” said Maggie, imploringly. Then, seeing that Wakem had ridden off, and that no further violence was possible, she slackened her hold and burst into hysteric sobs, while poor Mrs. Tulliver stood by in silence, quivering with fear. But Maggie became conscious that as she was slackening her hold, her father was beginning to grasp her and lean on her. The surprise checked her sobs.

“I feel ill—faintish,” he said. “Help me in, Bessy—I’m giddy—I’ve a pain i’ the head.”

He walked in slowly, propped by his wife and daughter, and tottered into his arm-chair. The almost purple flush had given way to paleness, and his hand was cold.

“Hadn’t we better send for the doctor?” said Mrs. Tulliver.

He seemed to be too faint and suffering to hear her; but presently, when she said to Maggie, “Go and see for somebody to fetch the doctor,” he looked up at her with full comprehension, and said, “Doctor? no—no doctor. It’s my head—that’s all. Help me to bed.”

Sad ending to the day that had risen on them all like a beginning of better times! But mingled seed must bear a mingled crop.

In half an hour after his father had lain down Tom came home. Bob Jakin was with him—come to congratulate “the old master,” not without some excusable pride that he had had his share in bringing about Mr. Tom’s good-luck; and Tom had thought his father would like nothing better, as a finish to the day, than a talk with Bob. But now Tom could only spend the evening in gloomy expectation of the unpleasant consequences that must follow on this mad outbreak of his father’s long-smothered hate. After the painful news had been told, he sat in silence: he had not spirit or inclination to tell his mother and sister anything about the dinner—they hardly cared to ask it. Apparently the mingled thread in the web of their life was so curiously twisted together, that there could be no joy without a sorrow coming close upon it. Tom was dejected by the thought that his exemplary effort must always be baffled by the wrong-doing of others: Maggie was living through, over and over again, the agony of the moment in which she had rushed to throw herself on her father’s arm—with a vague, shuddering foreboding of wretched scenes to come. Not one of the three felt any particular alarm about Mr. Tulliver’s health: the symptoms did not recall his former dangerous attack, and it seemed only a necessary consequence that his violent passion and effort of strength, after many hours of unusual excitement, should have made him feel ill. Rest would probably cure him.

Tom, tired out by his active day, fell asleep soon, and slept soundly: it seemed to him as if he had only just come to bed, when he waked to see his mother standing by him in the grey light of early morning.

“My boy, you must get up this minute: I’ve sent for the doctor, and your father wants you and Maggie to come to him.”

“Is he worse, mother?”

“He’s been very ill all night with his head, but he doesn’t say it’s worse—he only said sudden, ‘Bessy, fetch the boy and girl. Tell ’em to make haste.’ ”

Maggie and Tom threw on their clothes hastily in the chill grey light, and reached their father’s room almost at the same moment. He was watching for them with an expression of pain on his brow, but with sharpened anxious consciousness in his eyes. Mrs. Tulliver stood at the foot of the bed, frightened and trembling, looking worn and aged from disturbed rest. Maggie was at the bedside first, but her father’s glance was towards Tom, who came and stood next to her.

“Tom, my lad, it’s come upon me as I shan’t get up again.… This world’s been too many for me, my lad, but you’ve done what you could to make things a bit even. Shake hands wi’ me again, my lad, before I go away from you.”

The father and son clasped hands and looked at each other an instant. Then Tom said, trying to speak firmly—

“Have you any wish, father—that I can fulfil, when.…”

“Ay, my lad … you’ll try and get the old mill back.”

“Yes, father.”

“And there’s your mother—you’ll try and make her amends, all you can, for my bad luck … and there’s the little wench.…”

The father turned his eyes on Maggie with a still more eager look, while she, with a bursting heart, sank on her knees, to be closer to the dear, time-worn face which had been present with her through long years, as the sign of her deepest love and hardest trial.

“You must take care of her, Tom … don’t you fret, my wench … there’ll come somebody as’ll love you and take your part … and you must be good to her, my lad. I was good to *my* sister. Kiss me, Maggie.… Come, Bessy.… You’ll manage to pay for a brick grave, Tom, so as your mother and me can lie together.”

He looked away from them all when he had said this, and lay silent for some minutes, while they stood watching him, not daring to move. The morning light was growing clearer for them, and they could see the heaviness gathering in his face, and the dulness in his eyes. But at last he looked towards Tom and said—

"I had my turn—I beat him. That was nothing but fair. I never wanted anything but what was fair."

"But, father, dear father," said Maggie, an unspeakable anxiety predominating over her grief, "you forgive him—you forgive every one now?"

He did not move his eyes to look at her, but he said—

"No, my wench. I don't forgive him.… What's forgiving to do? I can't love a raskill.…"

His voice had become thicker; but he wanted to say more, and moved his lips again and again, struggling in vain to speak. At length the words forced their way.

"Does God forgive raskills?… but if He does, He won't be hard wi' me."

His hands moved uneasily, as if he wanted them to remove some obstruction that weighed upon him. Two or three times there fell from him some broken words—

"This world's … too many … honest man … puzzling.…"

Soon they merged into mere mutterings; the eyes had ceased to discern; and then came the final silence.

But not of death. For an hour or more the chest heaved, the loud hard breathing continued, getting gradually slower, as the cold dews gathered on the brow.

At last there was total stillness, and poor Tulliver's dimly-lighted soul had for ever ceased to be vexed with the painful riddle of this world.

Help was come now: Luke and his wife were there, and Mr. Turnbull had arrived, too late for everything but to say, "This is death."

Tom and Maggie went down-stairs together into the room where their father's place was empty. Their eyes turned to the same spot, and Maggie spoke:

"Tom, forgive me—let us always love each other;" and they clung and wept together.

BOOK SIXTH

THE GREAT TEMPTATION

CHAPTER I

A Duet in Paradise

The well-furnished drawing-room, with the open grand piano, and the pleasant outlook down a sloping garden to a boat-house by the side of the Floss, is Mr. Deane's. The neat little lady in mourning, whose light-brown ringlets are falling over the coloured embroidery with which her fingers are busy, is of course Lucy Deane; and the fine young man who is leaning down from his chair to snap the scissors in the extremely abbreviated face of the "King Charles" lying on the young lady's feet, is no other than Mr. Stephen Guest, whose diamond ring, attar of roses, and air of nonchalant leisure, at twelve o'clock in the day, are the graceful and odoriferous result of the largest oil-mill and the most extensive wharf in St. Ogg's. There is an apparent triviality in the action with the scissors, but your discernment perceives at once that there is a design in it which makes it eminently worthy of a large-headed, long-limbed young man; for you see that Lucy wants the scissors, and is compelled, reluctant as she may be, to shake her ringlets back, raise her soft hazel eyes, smile playfully down on the face that is so very nearly on a level with her knee, and, holding out her little shell-pink palm, to say—

"My scissors, please, if you can renounce the great pleasure of persecuting my poor Minny."

The foolish scissors have slipped too far over the knuckles, it seems, and Hercules holds out his entrapped fingers hopelessly.

"Confound the scissors! The oval lies the wrong way. Please, draw them off for me."

"Draw them off with your other hand," says Miss Lucy, roguishly.

"O, but that's my left hand: I'm not left-handed." Lucy laughs, and the scissors are drawn off with gentle touches from tiny tips, which

naturally dispose Mr. Stephen for a repetition *da capo*. Accordingly, he watches for the release of the scissors, that he may get them into his possession again.

“No, no,” said Lucy, sticking them in her band, “you shall not have my scissors again—you have strained them already. Now don’t set Minny growling again. Sit up and behave properly, and then I will tell you some news.”

“What is that?” said Stephen, throwing himself back and hanging his right arm over the corner of his chair. He might have been sitting for his portrait, which would have represented a rather striking young man of five-and twenty, with a square forehead, short dark-brown hair standing erect, with a slight wave at the end, like a thick crop of corn, and a half-ardent, half-sarcastic glance from under his well-marked horizontal eyebrows. “Is it very important news?”

“Yes—very. Guess.”

“You are going to change Minny’s diet, and give him three ratafias soaked in a dessert-spoonful of cream daily?”

“Quite wrong.”

“Well, then, Dr. Kenn has been preaching against buckram, and you ladies have all been sending him a round-robin, saying—‘This is a hard doctrine; who can bear it?’”

“For shame!” said Lucy, adjusting her little mouth gravely. “It is rather dull of you not to guess my news, because it is about something I mentioned to you not very long ago.”

“But you have mentioned many things to me not long ago. Does your feminine tyranny require that when you say the thing you mean is one of several things, I should know it immediately by that mark?”

“Yes, I know you think I am silly.”

“I think you are perfectly charming.”

“And my silliness is part of my charm?”

“I didn’t say *that.”*

“But I know you like women to be rather insipid. Philip Wakem betrayed you: he said so one day when you were not here.”

“O, I know Phil is fierce on that point; he makes it quite a personal matter. I think he must be love-sick for some unknown lady—some exalted Beatrice whom he met abroad.”

“By the by!” said Lucy, pausing in her work, “it has just occurred to me that I have never found out whether my cousin Maggie will object to see Philip, as her brother does. Tom will not enter a room where Philip is, if he knows it: perhaps Maggie may be the same, and then we shan’t be able to sing our glees—shall we?”

“What! is your cousin coming to stay with you?” said Stephen, with a look of slight annoyance.

“Yes, that was my news, which you have forgotten. She’s going to leave her situation, where she has been nearly two years, poor thing —ever since her father’s death; and she will stay with me a month or two—many months, I hope.”

“And am I bound to be pleased at that news?”

“O no, not at all,” said Lucy, with a little air of pique. “*I* am pleased, but that, of course, is no reason why *you* should be pleased. There is no girl in the world I love so well as my cousin Maggie.”

“And you will be inseparable, I suppose, when she comes. There will be no possibility of a *tête-à-tête* with you any more, unless you can find an admirer for her, who will pair off with her occasionally. What is the ground of dislike to Philip? He might have been a resource.”

“It is a family quarrel with Philip’s father. There were very painful circumstances, I believe. I never quite understood them, or knew them all. My uncle Tulliver was unfortunate and lost all his property, and I think he considered Mr. Wakem was somehow the cause of it. Mr. Wakem bought Dorlcote Mill, my uncle’s old place, where he always lived. You must remember my uncle Tulliver, don’t you?”

“No,” said Stephen, with rather supercilious indifference. “I’ve always known the name, and I daresay I knew the man by sight, apart from his name. I know half the names and faces in the neighbourhood in that detached, disjointed way.”

“He was a very hot-tempered man. I remember, when I was a little girl, and used to go to see my cousins, he often frightened me by talking as if he were angry. Papa told me there was a dreadful quarrel, the very day before my uncle’s death, between him and Mr. Wakem, but it was hushed up. That was when you were in London. Papa says my uncle was quite mistaken in many ways: his mind had become embittered. But Tom and Maggie must naturally feel it very painful to be reminded of these things. They have had so much—so very much trouble. Maggie was at school with me six years ago, when she was fetched away because of her father’s misfortunes, and she has hardly had any pleasure since, I think. She has been in a dreary situation in a school since uncle’s death, because she is determined to be independent, and not live with aunt Pullet; and I could hardly wish her to come to me then, because dear mamma was ill, and everything was so sad. That is why I want her to come to me now, and have a long, long holiday.”

“Very sweet and angelic of you,” said Stephen, looking at her with an admiring smile; “and all the more so if she has the conversational qualities of her mother.”

“Poor aunty! You are cruel to ridicule her. She is very valuable to *me*, I know. She manages the house beautifully—much better than any stranger would—and she was a great comfort to me in mamma’s illness.”

“Yes, but in point of companionship, one would prefer that she should be represented by her brandy-cherries and cream-cakes. I think with a shudder that her daughter will always be present in person, and have no agreeable proxies of that kind—a fat, blonde girl, with round blue eyes, who will stare at us silently.”

“O yes!” exclaimed Lucy, laughing wickedly and clapping her hands, “that is just my cousin Maggie. You must have seen her!”

“No, indeed: I’m only guessing what Mrs. Tulliver’s daughter must be; and then if she is to banish Philip, our only apology for a tenor, that will be an additional bore.”

“But I hope that may not be. I think I will ask you to call on Philip and tell him Maggie is coming to-morrow. He is quite aware of Tom’s feeling, and always keeps out of his way; so he will understand, if you tell him, that I asked you to warn him not to come until I write to ask him.”

“I think you had better write a pretty note for me to take: Phil is so sensitive, you know, the least thing might frighten him off coming at all, and we had hard work to get him. I can never induce him to come to the Park: he doesn’t like my sisters, I think. It is only your faëry touch that can lay his ruffled feathers.”

Stephen mastered the little hand that was straying towards the table, and touched it lightly with his lips. Little Lucy felt very proud and happy. She and Stephen were in that stage of courtship which makes the most exquisite moment of youth, the freshest blossom-time of passion—when each is sure of the other’s love, but no formal declaration has been made, and all its mutual divination, exalting the most trivial word, the lightest gesture, into thrills delicate and delicious as wafted jasmine scent. The explicitness of an engagement wears off this finest edge of susceptibility; it is jasmine gathered and presented in a large bouquet.

“But it is really odd that you should have hit so exactly on Maggie’s appearance and manners,” said the cunning Lucy, moving to reach her desk, “because she might have been like her brother, you know; and Tom has not round eyes; and he is as far as possible from staring at people.”

“O, I suppose he is like the father: he seems to be as proud as Lucifer. Not a brilliant companion, though, I should think.”

“I like Tom. He gave me my Minny when I lost Lolo; and papa is very fond of him: he says Tom has excellent principles. It was through him that his father was able to pay all his debts before he died.”

“Oh, ah; I’ve heard about that. I heard your father and mine talking about it a little while ago, after dinner, in one of their interminable discussions about business. They think of doing something for young Tulliver: he saved them from a considerable loss by riding home in some marvellous way, like Turpin, to bring them news about the stoppage of a bank, or something of that sort. But I was rather drowsy at the time.”

Stephen rose from his seat, and sauntered to the piano, humming in falsetto, “Graceful Consort,” as he turned over the volume of “The Creation,” which stood open on the desk.

“Come and sing this,” he said, when he saw Lucy rising.

“What! ‘Graceful Consort?’ I don’t think it suits your voice.”

“Never mind; it exactly suits my feeling, which, Philip will have it, is the grand element of good singing. I notice men with indifferent voices are usually of that opinion.”

“Philip burst into one of his invectives against ‘The Creation’ the other day,” said Lucy, seating herself at the piano. “He says it has a sort of sugared complacency and flattering make-believe in it, as if it were written for the birthday fête of a German GrandDuke.”

“O pooh! He is the fallen Adam with a soured temper. We are Adam and Eve unfallen, in paradise. Now, then—the recitative, for the sake of the moral. You will sing the whole duty of woman—‘And from obedience grows my pride and happiness.’”

“O no, I shall not respect an Adam who drags the *tempo*, as you will,” said Lucy, beginning to play the duet.

Surely the only courtship unshaken by doubts and fears, must be that in which the lovers can sing together. The sense of mutual fitness that springs from the two deep notes fulfilling expectation just at the right moment between the notes of the silvery soprano, from the perfect accord of descending thirds and fifths, from the preconcerted loving chase of a fugue, is likely enough to supersede any immediate demand for less impassioned forms of agreement. The contralto will not care to catechise the bass; the tenor will foresee no embarrassing dearth of remark in evenings spent with the

lovely soprano. In the provinces, too, where music was so scarce in that remote time, how could the musical people avoid falling in love with each other? Even political principle must have been in danger of relaxation under such circumstances; and the violin, faithful to rotten boroughs, must have been tempted to fraternise in a demoralising way with a reforming violoncello. In this case, the linnet-throated soprano, and the full-toned bass, singing,

> "With thee delight is ever new,
> With thee is life incessant bliss,"

believed what they sang all the more *because* they sang it.

"Now for Raphael's great song," said Lucy, when they had finished the duet. "You do the 'heavy beasts' to perfection."

"That sounds complimentary," said Stephen, looking at his watch. "By Jove, it's nearly half-past one. Well, I can just sing this."

Stephen delivered with admirable ease the deep notes representing the tread of the heavy beasts: but when a singer has an audience of two, there is room for divided sentiments. Minny's mistress was charmed; but Minny, who had intrenched himself, trembling, in his basket as soon as the music began, found this thunder so little to his taste that he leaped out and scampered under the remotest *chijfonière*, as the most eligible place in which a small dog could await the crack of doom.

"Adieu, 'graceful consort,' " said Stephen, buttoning his coat across when he had done singing, and smiling down from his tall height, with the air of rather a patronising lover, at the little lady on the music-stool. "My bliss is not incessant, for I must gallop home. I promised to be there at lunch."

"You will not be able to call on Philip, then? It is of no consequence: I have said everything in my note."

"You will be engaged with your cousin to-morrow, I suppose?"

"Yes, we are going to have a little family-party. My cousin Tom will dine with us; and poor aunty will have her two children

together for the first time. It will be very pretty; I think a great deal about it."

"But I may come the next day?"

"O yes! Come and be introduced to my cousin Maggie—though you can hardly be said not to have seen her, you have described her so well."

"Good-bye, then." And there was that slight pressure of the hands, and momentary meeting of the eyes, which will often leave a little lady with a slight flush and smile on her face that do not subside immediately when the door is closed, and with an inclination to walk up and down the room rather than to seat herself quietly at her embroidery, or other rational and improving occupation. At least this was the effect on Lucy; and you will not, I hope, consider it an indication of vanity predominating over more tender impulses, that she just glanced in the chimney-glass as her walk brought her near it. The desire to know that one has not looked an absolute fright during a few hours of conversation, may be construed as lying within the bonds of a laudable benevolent consideration for others. And Lucy had so much of this benevolence in her nature that I am inclined to think her small egoisms were impregnated with it, just as there are people not altogether unknown to you, whose small benevolences have a predominant and somewhat rank odour of egoism. Even now, that she is walking up and down with a little triumphant flutter of her girlish heart at the sense that she is loved by the person of chief consequence in her small world, you may see in her hazel eyes an ever-present sunny benignity, in which the momentary harmless flashes of personal vanity are quite lost; and if she is happy in thinking of her lover, it is because the thought of him mingles readily with all the gentle affections and good-natured offices with which she fills her peaceful days. Even now, her mind, with that instantaneous alternation which makes two currents of feeling or imagination seem simultaneous, is glancing continually from Stephen to the preparations she has only half finished in Maggie's room. Cousin Maggie should be treated as well as the grandest lady-visitor—nay, better, for she should have Lucy's best

prints and drawings in her bedroom, and the very finest bouquet of spring flowers on her table. Maggie would enjoy all that—she was so fond of pretty things! And there was poor aunt Tulliver, that no one made any account of—she was to be surprised with the present of a cap of superlative quality, and to have her health drunk in a gratifying manner, for which Lucy was going to lay a plot with her father this evening. Clearly, she had not time to indulge in long reveries about her own happy love-affairs. With this thought she walked towards the door, but paused there.

"What's the matter, then, Minny?" she said, stooping in answer to some whimpering of that small quadruped, and lifting his glossy head against her pink cheek. "Did you think I was going without you? Come, then, let us go and see Sinbad."

Sinbad was Lucy's chestnut horse, that she always fed with her own hand when he was turned out in the paddock. She was fond of feeding dependent creatures, and knew the private tastes of all the animals about the house, delighting in the little rippling sounds of her canaries when their beaks were busy with fresh seed, and in the small nibbling pleasures of certain animals which, lest she should appear too trivial, I will here call "the more familiar rodents."

Was not Stephen Guest right in his decided opinion that this slim maiden of eighteen was quite the sort of wife a man would not be likely to repent of marrying?—a woman who was loving and thoughtful for other women, not giving them Judas-kisses with eyes askance on their welcome defects, but with real care and vision for their half-hidden pains and mortifications, with long ruminating enjoyment of little pleasures prepared for them? Perhaps the emphasis of his admiration did not fall precisely on this rarest quality in her—perhaps he approved his own choice of her chiefly because she did not strike him as a remarkable rarity. A man likes his wife to be pretty: well, Lucy was pretty, but not to a maddening extent. A man likes his wife to be accomplished, gentle, affectionate, and not stupid; and Lucy had all these qualifications. Stephen was not surprised to find himself in love with her, and was conscious of excellent judgment in preferring her to Miss Leyburn, the daughter

of the county member, although Lucy was only the daughter of his father's subordinate partner; besides, he had had to defy and overcome a slight unwillingness and disappointment in his father and sisters—a circumstance which gives a young man an agreeable consciousness of his own dignity. Stephen was aware that he had sense and independence enough to choose the wife who was likely to make him happy, unbiassed by any indirect considerations. He meant to choose Lucy: she was a little darling, and exactly the sort of woman he had always most admired.

CHAPTER II

First Impressions

“He is very clever, Maggie,” said Lucy. She was kneeling on a footstool at Maggie’s feet, after placing that dark lady in the large crimson-velvet chair. “I feel sure you will like him. I hope you will.”

“I shall be very difficult to please,” said Maggie, smiling, and holding up one of Lucy’s long curls, that the sunlight might shine through it. “A gentleman who thinks he is good enough for Lucy must expect to be sharply criticised.”

“Indeed, he’s a great deal too good for me. And sometimes, when he is away, I almost think it can’t really be that he loves me. But I can never doubt it when he is with me—though I couldn’t bear any one but you to know that I feel in that way, Maggie.”

“Oh, then, if I disapprove of him you can give him up, since you are not engaged,” said Maggie, with playful gravity.

“I would rather not be engaged. When people are engaged, they begin to think of being married soon,” said Lucy, too thoroughly preoccupied to notice Maggie’s joke; “and I should like everything to go on for a long while just as it is. Sometimes I am quite frightened lest Stephen should say that he has spoken to papa; and from something that fell from papa the other day, I feel sure he and Mr. Guest are expecting that. And Stephen’s sisters are very civil to me now. At first, I think they didn’t like his paying me attention; and that was natural. It *does* seem out of keeping that I should ever live in a great place like the Park House—such a little insignificant thing as I am.”

“But people are not expected to be large in proportion to the houses they live in, like snails,” said Maggie, laughing. “Pray, are Mr. Guest’s sisters giantesses?”

“O no; and not handsome—that is, not very,” said Lucy, half-penitent at this uncharitable remark.

“But *he* is—at least he is generally considered very handsome.”

“Though you are unable to share that opinion?”

“O, I don’t know,” said Lucy, blushing pink over brow and neck. “It is a bad plan to raise expectation; you will perhaps be disappointed. But I have prepared a charming surprise for *him;* I shall have a glorious laugh against him. I shall not tell you what it is, though.”

Lucy rose from her knees and went to a little distance, holding her pretty head on one side, as if she had been arranging Maggie for a portrait, and wished to judge of the general effect.

“Stand up a moment, Maggie.”

“What is your pleasure now?” said Maggie, smiling languidly as she rose from her chair and looked down on her slight, aërial cousin, whose figure was quite subordinate to her faultless drapery of silk and crape.

Lucy kept her contemplative attitude a moment or two in silence, and then said—

“I can’t think what witchery it is in you, Maggie, that makes you look best in shabby clothes; though you really must have a new dress now. But do you know, last night I was trying to fancy you in a handsome fashionable dress, and do what I would, that old limp merino would come back as the only right thing for you. I wonder if Marie Antoinette looked all the grander when her gown was darned at the elbows. Now, if *I* were to put anything shabby on, I should be quite unnoticeable—I should be a mere rag.”

“O, quite,” said Maggie, with mock gravity. “You would be liable to be swept out of the room with the cobwebs and carpet-dust, and to find yourself under the grate, like Cinderella. Mayn’t I sit down now?”

“Yes, now you may,” said Lucy, laughing. Then, with an air of serious reflection, unfastening her large jet brooch, “But you must

change brooches, Maggie; that little butterfly looks silly on you."

"But won't that mar the charming effect of my consistent shabbiness?" said Maggie, seating herself submissively, while Lucy knelt again and unfastened the contemptible butterfly. "I wish my mother were of your opinion, for she was fretting last night because this is my best frock. I've been saving my money to pay for some lessons: I shall never get a better situation without more accomplishments."

Maggie gave a little sigh.

"Now, don't put on that sad look again," said Lucy, pinning the large brooch below Maggie's fine throat. "You're forgetting that you've left that dreary schoolroom behind you, and have no little girls' clothes to mend."

"Yes," said Maggie. "It is with me as I used to think it would be with the poor uneasy white bear I saw at the show. I thought he must have got so stupid with the habit of turning backwards and forwards in that narrow space, that he would keep doing it if they set him free. One gets a bad habit of being unhappy."

"But I shall put you under a discipline of pleasure that will make you lose that bad habit," said Lucy, sticking the black butterfly absently in her own collar, while her eyes met Maggie's affectionately.

"You dear, tiny thing," said Maggie, in one of her bursts of loving admiration, "you enjoy other people's happiness so much, I believe you would do without any of your own. I wish I were like you."

"I've never been tried in that way," said Lucy. "I've always been so happy. I don't know whether I could bear much trouble; I never had any but poor mamma's death. You *have* been tried, Maggie; and I'm sure you feel for other people quite as much as I do."

"No, Lucy," said Maggie, shaking her head slowly, "I don't enjoy their happiness as you do—else I should be more contented. I do feel for them when they are in trouble; I don't think I could ever bear to make any one *un*happy; and yet I often hate myself, because

I get angry sometimes at the sight of happy people. I think I get worse as I get older—more selfish. That seems very dreadful."

"Now, Maggie!" said Lucy, in a tone of remonstrance, "I don't believe a word of that. It is all a gloomy fancy—just because you are depressed by a dull, wearisome life."

"Well, perhaps it is," said Maggie, resolutely clearing away the clouds from her face with a bright smile, and throwing herself backward in her chair. "Perhaps it comes from the school diet—watery rice-pudding spiced with Pinnock. Let us hope it will give way before my mother's custards and this charming Geoffrey Crayon."

Maggie took up the "Sketch Book," which lay by her on the table.

"Do I look fit to be seen with this little brooch?" said Lucy, going to survey the effect in the chimney-glass.

"O no, Mr. Guest will be obliged to go out of the room again if he sees you in it. Pray make haste and put another on."

Lucy hurried out of the room, but Maggie did not take the opportunity of opening her book: she let it fall on her knees, while her eyes wandered to the window, where she could see the sunshine falling on the rich clumps of spring flowers and on the long hedge of laurels—and beyond, the silvery breadth of the dear old Floss, that at this distance seemed to be sleeping in a morning holiday. The sweet fresh garden-scent came through the open window, and the birds were busy flitting and alighting, gurgling and singing. Yet Maggie's eyes began to fill with tears. The sight of the old scenes had made the rush of memories so painful, that even yesterday she had only been able to rejoice in her mother's restored comfort and Tom's brotherly friendliness as we rejoice in good news of friends at a distance, rather than in the presence of a happiness which we share. Memory and imagination urged upon her a sense of privation too keen to let her taste what was offered in the transient present: her future, she thought, was likely to be worse than her past, for after her years of contented renunciation, she had slipped back into desire and longing: she found joyless days of distasteful occupation

harder and harder—she found the image of the intense and varied life she yearned for, and despaired of, becoming more and more importunate. The sound of the opening door roused her, and, hastily wiping away her tears, she began to turn over the leaves of her book.

“There is one pleasure, I know, Maggie, that your deepest dismalness will never resist,” said Lucy, beginning to speak as soon as she entered the room. “That is music, and I mean you to have quite a riotous feast of it. I mean you to get up your playing again, which used to be so much better than mine, when we were at Laceham.”

“You would have laughed to see me playing the little girls’ tunes over and over to them, when I took them to practice,” said Maggie, “just for the sake of fingering the dear keys again. But I don’t know whether I could play anything more difficult now than ‘Begone, dull care!’”

“I know what a wild state of joy you used to be in when the gleemen came round,” said Lucy, taking up her embroidery, “and we might have all those old glees that you used to love so, if I were certain that you don’t feel exactly as Tom does about some things.”

“I should have thought there was nothing you might be more certain of,” said Maggie, smiling.

“I ought rather to have said, one particular thing. Because if you feel just as he does about that, we shall want our third voice. St. Ogg’s is so miserably provided with musical gentlemen. There are really only Stephen and Philip Wakem who have any knowledge of music, so as to be able to sing a part.”

Lucy had looked up from her work as she uttered the last sentence, and saw that there was a change in Maggie’s face.

“Does it hurt you to hear the name mentioned, Maggie? If it does, I will not speak of him again. I know Tom will not see him if he can avoid it.”

“I don’t feel at all as Tom does on that subject,” said Maggie, rising and going to the window as if she wanted to see more of the

landscape. “I’ve always liked Philip Wakem ever since I was a little girl, and saw him at Lorton. He was so good when Tom hurt his foot.”

“O, I’m so glad!” said Lucy. “Then you won’t mind his coming sometimes, and we can have much more music than we could without him. I’m very fond of poor Philip, only I wish he were not so morbid about his deformity. I suppose it *is* his deformity that makes him so sad—and sometimes bitter. It is certainly very piteous to see his poor little crooked body and pale face among great strong people.”

“But, Lucy,” said Maggie, trying to arrest the prattling stream.…

“Ah, there is the door-bell. That must be Stephen,” Lucy went on, not noticing Maggie’s faint effort to speak. “One of the things I most admire in Stephen is, that he makes a greater friend of Philip than any one.”

It was too late for Maggie to speak now: the drawing-room door was opening, and Minny was already growling in a small way at the entrance of a tall gentleman, who went up to Lucy and took her hand with a half-polite, half-tender glance and tone of inquiry, which seemed to indicate that he was unconscious of any other presence.

“Let me introduce you to my cousin, Miss Tulliver,” said Lucy, turning with wicked enjoyment towards Maggie, who now approached from the farther window. “This is Mr. Stephen Guest.”

For one instant Stephen could not conceal his astonishment at the sight of this tall dark-eyed nymph with her jet-black coronet of hair; the next, Maggie felt herself, for the first time in her life, receiving the tribute of a very deep blush and a very deep bow from a person towards whom she herself was conscious of timidity. This new experience was very agreeable to her—so agreeable, that it almost effaced her previous emotion about Philip. There was a new brightness in her eyes, and a very becoming flush on her cheek, as she seated herself.

“I hope you perceive what a striking likeness you drew the day before yesterday,” said Lucy, with a pretty laugh of triumph. She enjoyed her lover’s confusion—the advantage was usually on his side.

“This designing cousin of yours quite deceived me, Miss Tulliver,” said Stephen, seating himself by Lucy, and stooping to play with Minny—only looking at Maggie furtively. “She said you had light hair and blue eyes.”

“Nay, it was you who said so,” remonstrated Lucy. “I only refrained from destroying your confidence in your own second-sight.”

“I wish I could always err in the same way,” said Stephen, “and find reality so much more beautiful than my preconceptions.”

“Now you have proved yourself equal to the occasion,” said Maggie, “and said what it was incumbent on you to say under the circumstances.”

She flashed a slightly defiant look at him: it was clear to her that he had been drawing a satirical portrait of her beforehand. Lucy had said he was inclined to be satirical, and Maggie had mentally supplied the addition—“and rather conceited.”

“An alarming amount of devil there,” was Stephen’s first thought. The second, when she had bent over her work, was, “I wish she would look at me again.” The next was to answer:

“I suppose all phrases of mere compliment have their turn to be true. A man is occasionally grateful when he says ‘thank you.’ It’s rather hard upon him that he must use the same words with which all the world declines a disagreeable invitation—don’t you think so, Miss Tulliver?”

“No,” said Maggie, looking at him with her direct glance; “if we use common words on a great occasion, they are the more striking, because they are felt at once to have a particular meaning, like old banners, or everyday clothes, hung up in a sacred place.”

“Then my compliment ought to be eloquent,” said Stephen, really not quite knowing what he said while Maggie looked at him, “seeing that the words were so far beneath the occasion.”

“No compliment can be eloquent, except as an expression of indifference,” said Maggie, flushing a little.

Lucy was rather alarmed: she thought Stephen and Maggie were not going to like each other. She had always feared lest Maggie should appear too odd and clever to please that critical gentleman. “Why, dear Maggie,” she interposed, “you have always pretended that you are too fond of being admired; and now, I think, you are angry because some one ventures to admire you.”

“Not at all,” said Maggie; “I like too well to feel that I am admired, but compliments never make me feel that.”

“I will never pay you a compliment again, Miss Tulliver,” said Stephen.

“Thank you; that will be a proof of respect.”

Poor Maggie! She was so unused to society that she could take nothing as a matter of course, and had never in her life spoken from the lips merely, so that she must necessarily appear absurd to more experienced ladies, from the excessive feeling she was apt to throw into very trivial incidents. But she was even conscious herself of a little absurdity in this instance. It was true she had a theoretic objection to compliments, and had once said impatiently to Philip, that she didn’t see why women were to be told with a simper that they were beautiful, any more than old men were to be told that they were venerable: still, to be so irritated by a common practice in the case of a stranger like Mr. Stephen Guest, and to care about his having spoken slightingly of her before he had seen her, was certainly unreasonable, and as soon as she was silent she began to be ashamed of herself. It did not occur to her that her irritation was due to the pleasanter emotion which preceded it, just as when we are satisfied with a sense of glowing warmth, an innocent drop of cold water may fall upon us as a sudden smart.

Stephen was too well-bred not to seem unaware that the previous conversation could have been felt embarrassing, and at once began to talk of impersonal matters, asking Lucy if she knew when the bazaar was at length to take place, so that there might be some hope of seeing her rain the influence of her eyes on objects more grateful than those worsted flowers that were growing under her fingers.

“Some day next month, I believe,” said Lucy. “But your sisters are doing more for it than I am: they are to have the largest stall.”

“Ah, yes; but they carry on their manufactures in their own sitting-room, where I don’t intrude on them. I see you are not addicted to the fashionable vice of fancy-work, Miss Tulliver,” said Stephen, looking at Maggie’s plain hemming.

“No,” said Maggie, “I can do nothing more difficult or more elegant than shirt-making.”

“And your plain sewing is so beautiful, Maggie,” said Lucy, “that I think I shall beg a few specimens of you to show as fancy-work. Your exquisite sewing is quite a mystery to me—you used to dislike that sort of work so much in old days.”

“It is a mystery easily explained, dear,” said Maggie, looking up quietly. “Plain sewing was the only thing I could get money by; so I was obliged to try and do it well.”

Lucy, good and simple as she was, could not help blushing a little: she did not quite like that Stephen should know that—Maggie need not have mentioned it. Perhaps there was some pride in the confession: the pride of poverty that will not be ashamed of itself. But if Maggie had been the queen of coquettes she could hardly have invented a means of giving greater piquancy to her beauty in Stephen’s eyes: I am not sure that the quiet admission of plain sewing and poverty would have done alone, but assisted by the beauty, they made Maggie more unlike other women even than she had seemed at first.

“But I can knit, Lucy,” Maggie went on, “if that will be of any use for your bazaar.”

“O yes, of infinite use. I shall set you to work with scarlet wool to-morrow. But your sister is the most enviable person,” continued Lucy, turning to Stephen, “to have the talent of modelling. She is doing a wonderful bust of Dr. Kenn entirely from memory.”

“Why, if she can remember to put the eyes very near together, and the corners of the mouth very far apart, the likeness can hardly fail to be striking in St. Ogg’s.”

“Now that is very wicked of you,” said Lucy, looking rather hurt. “I didn’t think you would speak disrespectfully of Dr. Kenn.”

“I say anything disrespectful of Dr. Kenn? Heaven forbid! But I am not bound to respect a libellous bust of him. I think Kenn one of the finest fellows in the world. I don’t care much about the tall candlesticks he has put on the communion-table, and I shouldn’t like to spoil my temper by getting up to early prayers every morning. But he’s the only man I ever knew personally who seems to me to have anything of the real apostle in him—a man who has eight hundred a-year, and is contented with deal furniture and boiled beef because he gives away two-thirds of his income. That was a very fine thing of him—taking into his house that poor lad Grattan who shot his mother by accident. He sacrifices more time than a less busy man could spare, to save the poor fellow from getting into a morbid state of mind about it. He takes the lad out with him constantly, I see.”

“That is beautiful,” said Maggie, who had let her work fall, and was listening with keen interest. “I never knew any one who did such things.”

“And one admires that sort of action in Kenn all the more,” said Stephen, “because his manners in general are rather cold and severe. There’s nothing sugary and maudlin about him.”

“O, I think he’s a perfect character!” said Lucy, with pretty enthusiasm.

“No; there I can’t agree with you,” said Stephen, shaking his head with sarcastic gravity.

“Now, what fault can you point out in him?”

“He’s an Anglican.”

“Well, those are the right views, I think,” said Lucy, gravely.

“That settles the question in the abstract,” said Stephen, “but not from a parliamentary point of view. He has set the Dissenters and the Church people by the ears; and a rising senator like myself, of whose services the country is very much in need, will find it inconvenient when he puts up for the honour of representing St. Ogg’s in Parliament.”

“Do you really think of that?” said Lucy, her eyes brightening with a proud pleasure that made her neglect the argumentative interests of Anglicanism.

“Decidedly—whenever old Mr. Leyburn’s public spirit and gout induce him to give way. My father’s heart is set on it; and gifts like mine, you know”—here Stephen drew himself up, and rubbed his large white hands over his hair with playful self-admiration—“gifts like mine involve great responsibilities. Don’t you think so, Miss Tulliver?”

“Yes,” said Maggie, smiling, but not looking up; “so much fluency and self-possession should not be wasted entirely on private occasions.”

“Ah, I see how much penetration you have,” said Stephen. “You have discovered already that I am talkative and impudent. Now superficial people never discern that—owing to my manner, I suppose.”

“She doesn’t look at me when I talk of myself,” he thought, while his listeners were laughing. “I must try other subjects.”

Did Lucy intend to be present at the meeting of the Book Club next week? was the next question. Then followed the recommendation to choose Southey’s “Life of Cowper,” unless she were inclined to be philosophical, and startle the ladies of St. Ogg’s by voting for one of the Bridgewater Treatises. Of course Lucy wished to know what these alarmingly learned books were; and as it is always pleasant to improve the minds of ladies by talking to them at ease on subjects of which they know nothing, Stephen became

quite brilliant in an account of Buckland's Treatise, which he had just been reading. He was rewarded by seeing Maggie let her work fall, and gradually get so absorbed in his wonderful geological story that she sat looking at him, leaning forward with crossed arms, and with an entire absence of self-consciousness, as if he had been the snuffiest of old professors, and she a downy-lipped alumnus. He was so fascinated by this clear, large gaze, that at last he forgot to look away from it occasionally towards Lucy; but she, sweet child, was only rejoicing that Stephen was proving to Maggie how clever he was, and that they would certainly be good friends after all.

"I will bring you the book, shall I, Miss Tulliver?" said Stephen, when he found the stream of his recollections running rather shallow. "There are many illustrations in it that you will like to see."

"O, thank you," said Maggie, blushing with returning self-consciousness at this direct address, and taking up her work again.

"No, no," Lucy interposed. "I must forbid your plunging Maggie in books. I shall never get her away from them; and I want her to have delicious do-nothing days, filled with boating, and chatting, and riding, and driving: that is the holiday she needs."

"Apropos!" said Stephen, looking at his watch. "Shall we go out for a row on the river now? The tide will suit for us to go the Tofton way, and we can walk back."

That was a delightful proposition to Maggie, for it was years since she had been on the river. When she was gone to put on her bonnet, Lucy lingered to give an order to the servant, and took the opportunity of telling Stephen that Maggie had no objection to seeing Philip, so that it was a pity she had sent that note the day before yesterday. But she would write another to-morrow and invite him.

"I'll call and beat him up to-morrow," said Stephen, "and bring him with me in the evening, shall I? My sisters will want to call on you when I tell them your cousin is with you. I must leave the field clear for them in the morning."

“O yes, pray bring him,” said Lucy. “And you *will* like Maggie, shan’t you?” she added, in a beseeching tone. “Isn’t she a dear, noble-looking creature?”

“Too tall,” said Stephen, smiling down upon her, “and a little too fiery. She is not my type of woman, you know.”

Gentlemen, you are aware, are apt to impart these imprudent confidences to ladies concerning their unfavourable opinion of sister fair ones. That is why so many women have the advantage of knowing that they are secretly repulsive to men who have self-denyingly made ardent love to them. And hardly anything could be more distinctively characteristic of Lucy, than that she both implicitly believed what Stephen said, and was determined that Maggie should not know it. But you, who have a higher logic than the verbal to guide you, have already foreseen, as the direct sequence to that unfavourable opinion of Stephen’s, that he walked down to the boat-house calculating, by the aid of a vivid imagination, that Maggie must give him her hand at least twice in consequence of this pleasant boating plan, and that a gentleman who wishes ladies to look at him is advantageously situated when he is rowing them in a boat. What then? Had he fallen in love with this surprising daughter of Mrs. Tulliver at first sight? Certainly not. Such passions are never heard of in real life. Besides, he was in love already, and half-engaged to the dearest little creature in the world; and he was not a man to make a fool of himself in any way. But when one is five-and-twenty, one has not chalk-stones at one’s finger-ends that the touch of a handsome girl should be entirely indifferent. It was perfectly natural and safe to admire beauty and enjoy looking at it—at least under such circumstances as the present. And there was really something very interesting about this girl, with her poverty and troubles: it was gratifying to see the friendship between the two cousins. Generally, Stephen admitted, he was not fond of women who had any peculiarity of character—but here the peculiarity seemed really of a superior kind; and provided one is not obliged to marry such women, why, they certainly make a variety in social intercourse.

Maggie did not fulfil Stephen's hope by looking at him during the first quarter of an hour: her eyes were too full of the old banks that she knew so well. She felt lonely, cut off from Philip—the only person who had ever seemed to love her devotedly, as she had always longed to be loved. But presently the rhythmic movement of the oars attracted her, and she thought she should like to learn how to row. This roused her from her reverie, and she asked if she might take an oar. It appeared that she required much teaching, and she became ambitious. The exercise brought the warm blood into her cheeks, and made her inclined to take her lesson merrily.

"I shall not be satisfied until I can manage both oars, and row you and Lucy," she said, looking very bright as she stepped out of the boat. Maggie, we know, was apt to forget the thing she was doing, and she had chosen an inopportune moment for her remark: her foot slipped, but happily Mr. Stephen Guest held her hand, and kept her up with a firm grasp.

"You have not hurt yourself at all, I hope?" he said, bending to look in her face with anxiety. It was very charming to be taken care of in that kind graceful manner by some one taller and stronger than one's self. Maggie had never felt just in the same way before.

When they reached home again, they found uncle and aunt Pullet seated with Mrs. Tulliver in the drawing-room, and Stephen hurried away, asking leave to come again in the evening.

"And pray bring with you the volume of Purcell that you took away," said Lucy. "I want Maggie to hear your best songs."

Aunt Pullet, under the certainty that Maggie would be invited to go out with Lucy, probably to Park House, was much shocked at the shabbiness of her clothes, which, when witnessed by the higher society of St. Ogg's, would be a discredit to the family, that demanded a strong and prompt remedy; and the consultation as to what would be most suitable to this end from among the superfluities of Mrs. Pullet's wardrobe, was one that Lucy as well as Mrs. Tulliver entered into with some zeal. Maggie must really have

an evening-dress as soon as possible, and she was about the same height as aunt Pullet.

“But she’s so much broader across the shoulders than I am—it’s very ill-convenient,” said Mrs. Pullet, “else she might wear that beautiful black brocade o’ mine without any alteration; and her arms are beyond everything,” added Mrs. Pullet, sorrowfully, as she lifted Maggie’s large round arm. “She’d never get my sleeves on.”

“O never mind that, aunt: pray send us the dress,” said Lucy. “I don’t mean Maggie to have long sleeves, and I have abundance of black lace for trimming. Her arms will look beautiful.”

“Maggie’s arms *are* a pretty shape,” said Mrs. Tulliver. “They’re like mine used to be—only mine was never brown: I wish she’d had *our* family skin.”

“Nonsense, aunty!” said Lucy, patting her aunt Tulliver’s shoulder, “you don’t understand those things. A painter would think Maggie’s complexion beautiful.”

“May be, my dear,” said Mrs. Tulliver, submissively. “You know better than I do. Only when I was young a brown skin wasn’t thought well on among respectable folks.”

“No,” said uncle Pullet, who took intense interest in the ladies’ conversation as he sucked his lozenges. “Though there was a song about the ‘Nut-brown Maid,’ too; I think she was crazy—crazy Kate —but I can’t justly remember.”

“O dear, dear!” said Maggie, laughing, but impatient; “I think that will be the end of *my* brown skin, if it’s always to be talked about so much.”

CHAPTER III

Confidential Moments

When Maggie went up to her bedroom that night, it appeared that she was not at all inclined to undress. She set down her candle on the first table that presented itself, and began to walk up and down her room, which was a large one, with a firm, regular, and rather rapid step, which showed that the exercise was the instinctive vent of strong excitement. Her eyes and cheeks had an almost feverish brilliancy; her head was thrown backward, and her hands were clasped with the palms outward, and with that tension of the arms which is apt to accompany mental absorption.

Had anything remarkable happened?

Nothing that you are not likely to consider in the highest degree unimportant. She had been hearing some fine music sung by a fine bass voice—but then it was sung in a provincial, amateur fashion, such as would have left a critical ear much to desire. And she was conscious of having been looked at a great deal, in rather a furtive manner, from beneath a pair of well-marked horizontal eyebrows, with a glance that seemed somehow to have caught the vibratory influence of the voice. Such things could have had no perceptible effect on a thoroughly well-educated young lady, with a perfectly balanced mind, who had had all the advantages of fortune, training, and refined society. But if Maggie had been that young lady, you would probably have known nothing about her: her life would have had so few vicissitudes that it could hardly have been written; for the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history.

In poor Maggie's highly-strung, hungry nature—just come away from a third-rate schoolroom, with all its jarring sounds and petty round of tasks—these apparently trivial causes had the effect of rousing and exalting her imagination in a way that was mysterious to herself. It was not that she thought distinctly of Mr. Stephen

Guest, or dwelt on the indications that he looked at her with admiration; it was rather that she felt the half-remote presence of a world of love and beauty and delight, made up of vague, mingled images from all the poetry and romance she had ever read, or had ever woven in her dreamy reveries. Her mind glanced back once or twice to the time when she had courted privation, when she had thought all longing, all impatience was subdued; but that condition seemed irrecoverably gone, and she recoiled from the remembrance of it. No prayer, no striving now, would bring back that negative peace: the battle of her life, it seemed, was not to be decided in that short and easy way—by perfect renunciation at the very threshold of her youth. The music was vibrating in her still—Purcell's music, with its wild passion and fancy—and she could not stay in the recollection of that bare, lonely past. She was in her brighter aërial world again, when a little tap came at the door: of course it was her cousin, who entered in ample white dressinggown.

"Why, Maggie, you naughty child, haven't you begun to undress?" said Lucy, in astonishment. "I promised not to come and talk to you, because I thought you must be tired. But here you are, looking as if you were ready to dress for a ball. Come, come, get on your dressing-gown, and unplait your hair."

"Well, *you* are not very forward," retorted Maggie, hastily reaching her own pink cotton gown, and looking at Lucy's light-brown hair brushed back in curly disorder.

"O, I have not much to do. I shall sit down and talk to you till I see you are really on the way to bed."

While Maggie stood and unplaited her long black hair over her pink drapery, Lucy sat down near the toilette-table, watching her with affectionate eyes, and head a little aside, like a pretty spaniel. If it appears to you at all incredible that young ladies should be led on to talk confidentially in a situation of this kind, I will beg you to remember that human life furnishes many exceptional cases.

"You really *have* enjoyed the music to-night, haven't you, Maggie?"

“O yes, that is what prevents me from feeling sleepy. I think I should have no other mortal wants, if I could always have plenty of music. It seems to infuse strength into my limbs, and ideas into my brain. Life seems to go on without effort, when I am filled with music. At other times one is conscious of carrying a weight.”

“And Stephen has a splendid voice, hasn’t he?”

“Well, perhaps we are neither of us judges of that,” said Maggie, laughing, as she seated herself and tossed her long hair back. “You are not impartial, and *I* think any barrel-organ splendid.”

“But tell me what you think of him, now. Tell me exactly—good and bad too.”

“O, I think you should humiliate him a little. A lover should not be so much at ease, and so self-confident. He ought to tremble more.”

“Nonsense, Maggie! As if any one could tremble at me! You think he is conceited—I see that. But you don’t dislike him, do you?”

“Dislike him! No. Am I in the habit of seeing such charming people, that I should be very difficult to please? Besides, how could I dislike any one that promised to make you happy, you dear thing!” Maggie pinched Lucy’s dimpled chin.

“We shall have more music to-morrow evening,” said Lucy, looking happy already, “for Stephen will bring Philip Wakem with him.”

“O Lucy, I can’t see him,” said Maggie, turning pale. “At least, I could not see him without Tom’s leave.”

“Is Tom such a tyrant as that?” said Lucy, surprised. “I’ll take the responsibility, then—tell him it was my fault.”

“But, dear,” said Maggie, falteringly, “I promised Tom very solemnly—before my father’s death—I promised him I would not speak to Philip without his knowledge and consent. And I have a great dread of opening the subject with Tom—of getting into a quarrel with him again.”

“But I never heard of anything so strange and unreasonable. What harm can poor Philip have done? May I speak to Tom about it?”

“O no, pray don’t, dear,” said Maggie. “I’ll go to him myself tomorrow, and tell him that you wish Philip to come. I’ve thought before of asking him to absolve me from my promise, but I’ve not had the courage to determine on it.”

They were both silent for some moments, and then Lucy said—

“Maggie, you have secrets from me, and I have none from you.”

Maggie looked meditatively away from Lucy. Then she turned to her and said, “I *should* like to tell you about Philip. But, Lucy, you must not betray that you know it to any one—least of all to Philip himself, or to Mr. Stephen Guest.”

The narrative lasted long, for Maggie had never before known the relief of such an outpouring: she had never before told Lucy anything of her inmost life; and the sweet face bent towards her with sympathetic interest, and the little hand pressing hers, encouraged her to speak on. On two points only she was not expansive. She did not betray fully what still rankled in her mind as Tom’s great offence—the insults he had heaped on Philip. Angry as the remembrance still made her, she could not bear that any one else should know it all—both for Tom’s sake and Philip’s. And she could not bear to tell Lucy of the last scene between her father and Wakem, though it was this scene which she had ever since felt to be a new barrier between herself and Philip. She merely said, she saw now that Tom was, on the whole, right in regarding any prospect of love and marriage between her and Philip as put out of the question by the relation of the two families. Of course Philip’s father would never consent.

“There, Lucy, you have had my story,” said Maggie, smiling, with the tears in her eyes. “You see I am like Sir Andrew Aguecheek—*I* was adored once.”

“Ah, now I see how it is you know Shakespeare and everything, and have learned so much since you left school; which always

seemed to me witchcraft before—part of your general uncanniness," said Lucy.

She mused a little with her eyes downward, and then added, looking at Maggie, "It is very beautiful that you should love Philip: I never thought such a happiness would befall him. And in my opinion, you ought not to give him up. There are obstacles now; but they may be done away with in time."

Maggie shook her head.

"Yes, yes," persisted Lucy; "I can't help being hopeful about it. There is something romantic in it—out of the common way—just what everything that happens to you ought to be. And Philip will adore you like a husband in a fairy tale. O, I shall puzzle my small brain to contrive some plot that will bring everybody into the right mind, so that you may marry Philip, when I marry—somebody else. Wouldn't that be a pretty ending to all my poor, poor Maggie's troubles?"

Maggie tried to smile, but shivered, as if she felt a sudden chill.

"Ah, dear, you are cold," said Lucy. "You must go to bed; and so must I. I dare not think what time it is."

They kissed each other, and Lucy went away—possessed of a confidence which had a strong influence over her subsequent impressions. Maggie had been thoroughly sincere: her nature had never found it easy to be otherwise. But confidences are sometimes blinding, even when they are sincere.

CHAPTER IV

Brother and Sister

Maggie was obliged to go to Tom's lodgings in the middle of the day, when he would be coming in to dinner, else she would not have found him at home. He was not lodging with entire strangers. Our friend Bob Jakin had, with Mumps's tacit consent, taken not only a wife about eight months ago, but also one of those queer old houses pierced with surprising passages, by the water-side, where, as he observed, his wife and mother could keep themselves out of mischief by letting out two "pleasure-boats," in which he had invested some of his savings, and by taking in a lodger for the parlour and spare bedroom. Under these circumstances, what could be better for the interests of all parties, sanitary considerations apart, than that the lodger should be Mr. Tom?

It was Bob's wife who opened the door to Maggie. She was a tiny woman, with the general physiognomy of a Dutch doll, looking, in comparison with Bob's mother, who filled up the passage in the rear, very much like one of those human figures which the artist finds conveniently standing near a colossal statue to show the proportions. The tiny woman curtsied and looked up at Maggie with some awe as soon as she had opened the door; but the words, "Is my brother at home?" which Maggie uttered smilingly, made her turn round with sudden excitement, and say—

"Eh, mother, mother—tell Bob!—it's Miss Maggie! Come in, Miss, for goodness do," she went on, opening a side door, and endeavouring to flatten her person against the wall to make the utmost space for the visitor.

Sad recollections crowded on Maggie as she entered the small parlour, which was now all that poor Tom had to call by the name of "home"—that name which had once, so many years ago, meant for both of them the same sum of dear familiar objects. But

everything was not strange to her in this new room: the first thing her eyes dwelt on was the large old Bible, and the sight was not likely to disperse the old memories. She stood without speaking.

“If you please to take the privilege o’ sitting down, Miss,” said Mrs. Jakin, rubbing her apron over a perfectly clean chair, and then lifting up the corner of that garment and holding it to her face with an air of embarrassment, as she looked wonderingly at Maggie.

“Bob is at home, then? “said Maggie, recovering herself, and smiling at the bashful Dutch doll.

“Yes, Miss; but I think he must be washing and dressing himself—I’ll go and see,” said Mrs. Jakin, disappearing.

But she presently came back walking with new courage a little way behind her husband, who showed the brilliancy of his blue eyes and regular white teeth in the doorway, bowing respectfully.

“How do you do, Bob?” said Maggie, coming forward and putting out her hand to him; “I always meant to pay your wife a visit, and I shall come another day on purpose for that, if she will let me. But I was obliged to come to-day, to speak to my brother.”

“He’ll be in before long, Miss. He’s doin’ finely, Mr. Tom is: he’ll be one o’ the first men hereabouts—you’ll see that.”

“Well, Bob, I’m sure he’ll be indebted to you, whatever he becomes: he said so himself only the other night, when he was talking of you.”

“Eh, Miss, that’s his way o’ takin’ it. But I think the more on’t when he says a thing, because his tongue doesn’t overshoot him as mine does. Lors! I’m no better nor a tilted bottle, I arn’t—I can’t stop mysen when once I begin. But you look rarely, Miss—it does me good to see you. What do you say now, Prissy?”—here Bob turned to his wife. “Isn’t it all come true as I said? Though there isn’t many sorts o’ goods as I can’t over-praise when I set my tongue to’t.”

Mrs. Bob’s small nose seemed to be following the example of her eyes in turning up reverentially towards Maggie, but she was able now to smile and curtsy, and say, “I’d looked forrard like aenything

to seein' you, Miss, for my husband's tongue's been runnin' on you, like as if he was light-headed, iver since first he come a-courtin' on me."

"Well, well," said Bob, looking rather silly. "Go an' see after the taters, else Mr. Tom 'ull have to wait for 'em."

"I hope Mumps is friendly with Mrs. Jakin, Bob," said Maggie, smiling. "I remember you used to say, he wouldn't like your marrying."

"Eh, Miss," said Bob, grinning, "he made up his mind to't when he see'd what a little un she was. He pretends not to see her mostly, or else to think as she isn't full-growed. But about Mr. Tom, Miss," said Bob, speaking lower and looking serious, "he's as close as a iron biler, he is; but I'm a 'cutish chap, an' when I've left off carrying my pack, an' am at a loose end, I've got more brains nor I know what to do wi', an' I'm forced to busy myself wi' other folks's insides. An' it worrets me as Mr. Tom 'ull sit by himself so glumpish, a-knittin' his brow, an' a-lookin' at the fire of a night. He should be a bit livelier now—a fine young fellow like him. My wife says, when she goes in sometimes, an' he takes no notice of her, he sits lookin' into the fire, and frownin' as if he was watchin' folks at work in it."

"He thinks so much about business," said Maggie.

"Ay," said Bob, speaking lower; "but do you think it's nothin' else, Miss? He's close, Mr. Tom is; but I'm a 'cute chap, I am, an' I thought tow'rt last Christmas as I'd found out a soft place in him. It was about a little black spaniel—a rare bit o' breed—as he made a fuss to get. But since then summat's come over him, as he's set his teeth again' things more nor iver, for all he's had such good-luck. An' I wanted to tell *you*, Miss, 'cause I thought you might work it out of him a bit, now you're come. He's a deal too lonely, and doesn't go into company enough."

"I'm afraid I have very little power over him, Bob," said Maggie, a good deal moved by Bob's suggestion. It was a totally new idea to her mind, that Tom could have his love troubles. Poor fellow!—and in love with Lucy too! But it was perhaps a mere fancy of Bob's too

officious brain. The present of the dog meant nothing more than cousinship and gratitude. But Bob had already said, “Here’s Mr. Tom,” and the outer door was opening.

“There’s no time to spare, Tom,” said Maggie, as soon as Bob had left the room. “I must tell you at once what I came about, else I shall be hindering you from taking your dinner.”

Tom stood with his back against the chimney-piece, and Maggie was seated opposite the light. He noticed that she was tremulous, and he had a presentiment of the subject she was going to speak about. The presentiment made his voice colder and harder as he said, “What is it?”

This tone roused a spirit of resistance in Maggie, and she put her request in quite a different form from the one she had predetermined on. She rose from her seat, and, looking straight at Tom, said—

“I want you to absolve me from my promise about Philip Wakem. Or rather, I promised you not to see him without telling you. I am come to tell you that I wish to see him.”

“Very well,” said Tom, still more coldly.

But Maggie had hardly finished speaking in that chill, defiant manner, before she repented, and felt the dread of alienation from her brother.

“Not for myself, dear Tom. Don’t be angry. I shouldn’t have asked it, only that Philip, you know, is a friend of Lucy’s, and she wishes him to come—has invited him to come this evening; and I told her I couldn’t see him without telling you. I shall only see him in the presence of other people. There will never be anything secret between us again.”

Tom looked away from Maggie, knitting his brow more strongly for a little while. Then he turned to her and said, slowly and emphatically—

“You know what is my feeling on that subject, Maggie. There is no need for my repeating anything I said a year ago. While my

father was living, I felt bound to use the utmost power over you, to prevent you from disgracing him as well as yourself, and all of us. But now I must leave you to your own choice. You wish to be independent—you told me so after my father's death. My opinion is not changed. If you think of Philip Wakem as a lover again, you must give up me."

"I don't wish it, dear Tom—at least as things are: I see that it would lead to misery. But I shall soon go away to another situation, and I should like to be friends with him again while I am here. Lucy wishes it."

The severity of Tom's face relaxed a little.

"I shouldn't mind your seeing him occasionally at my uncle's—I don't want you to make a fuss on the subject. But I have no confidence in you, Maggie. You would be led away to do anything."

That was a cruel word. Maggie's lip began to tremble.

"Why will you say that, Tom? It is very hard of you. Have I not done and borne everything as well as I could? And I have kept my word to you—when—when.... My life has not been a happy one, any more than yours."

She was obliged to be childish—the tears would come. When Maggie was not angry, she was as dependent on kind or cold words as a daisy on the sunshine or the cloud: the need of being loved would always subdue her, as, in old days, it subdued her in the worm-eaten attic. The brother's goodness came uppermost at this appeal, but it could only show itself in Tom's fashion. He put his hand gently on her arm, and said, in the tone of a kind pedagogue—

"Now listen to me, Maggie. I'll tell you what I mean. You're always in extremes—you have no judgment and self-command; and yet you think you know best, and will not submit to be guided. You know I didn't wish you to take a situation. My aunt Pullet was willing to give you a good home, and you might have lived respectably amongst your relations, until I could have provided a home for you with my mother. And that is what I should like to do. I wished my sister to be a lady, and I would always have taken care

of you, as my father desired, until you were well married. But your ideas and mine never accord, and you will not give way. Yet you might have sense enough to see that a brother, who goes out into the world and mixes with men, necessarily knows better what is right and respectable for his sister than she can know herself. You think I am not kind; but my kindness can only be directed by what I believe to be good for you."

"Yes—I know—dear Tom," said Maggie, still half-sobbing, but trying to control her tears. "I know you would do a great deal for me: I know how you work, and don't spare yourself. I am grateful to you. But, indeed, you can't quite judge for me—our natures are very different. You don't know how differently things affect me from what they do you."

"Yes, I *do* know: I know it too well. I know how differently you must feel about all that affects our family, and your own dignity as a young woman, before you could think of receiving secret addresses from Philip Wakem. If it was not disgusting to me in every other way, I should object to my sister's name being associated for a moment with that of a young man whose father must hate the very thought of us all, and would spurn you. With any one but you, I should think it quite certain that what you witnessed just before my father's death would secure you from ever thinking again of Philip Wakem as a lover. But I don't feel certain of it with you—I never feel certain about anything with *you*. At one time you take pleasure in a sort of perverse self-denial, and at another you have not resolution to resist a thing that you know to be wrong."

There was a terrible cutting truth in Tom's words—that hard rind of truth which is discerned by unimaginative, unsympathetic minds. Maggie always writhed under this judgment of Tom's: she rebelled and was humiliated in the same moment: it seemed as if he held a glass before her to show her her own folly and weakness—as if he were a prophetic voice predicting her future fallings—and yet, all the while, she judged him in return: she said inwardly that he was narrow and unjust, that he was below feeling those mental needs

which were often the source of the wrong-doing or absurdity that made her life a planless riddle to him.

She did not answer directly: her heart was too full, and she sat down, leaning her arm on the table. It was no use trying to make Tom feel that she was near to him. He always repelled her. Her feeling under his words was complicated by the allusion to the last scene between her father and Wakem; and at length that painful, solemn memory surmounted the immediate grievance. No! She did not think of such things with frivolous indifference, and Tom must not accuse her of that. She looked up at him with a grave, earnest gaze, and said—

"I can't make you think better of me, Tom, by anything I can say. But I am not so shut out from all your feelings as you believe me to be. I see as well as you do, that from our position with regard to Philip's father—not on other grounds—it would be unreasonable—it would be wrong for us to entertain the idea of marriage; and I have given up thinking of him as a lover.... I am telling you the truth, and you have no right to disbelieve me: I have kept my word to you, and you have never detected me in a falsehood. I should not only not encourage, I should carefully avoid, any intercourse with Philip on any other footing than that of quiet friendship. You may think that I am unable to keep my resolutions; but at least you ought not to treat me with hard contempt on the ground of faults that I have not committed yet."

"Well, Maggie," said Tom, softening under this appeal, "I don't want to overstrain matters. I think, all things considered, it will be best for you to see Philip Wakem, if Lucy wishes him to come to the house. I believe what you say—at least you believe it yourself, I know: I can only warn you. I wish to be as good a brother to you as you will let me."

There was a little tremor in Tom's voice as he uttered the last words, and Maggie's ready affection came back with as sudden a glow as when they were children, and bit their cake together as a sacrament of conciliation. She rose and laid her hand on Tom's shoulder.

“Dear Tom, I know you mean to be good. I know you have had a great deal to bear, and have done a great deal. I should like to be a comfort to you—not to vex you. You don’t think I’m altogether naughty, now, do you?”

Tom smiled at the eager face: his smiles were very pleasant to see when they did come, for the grey eyes could be tender underneath the frown.

“No, Maggie.”

“I may turn out better than you expect.”

“I hope you will.”

“And may I come some day and make tea for you, and see this extremely small wife of Bob’s again?”

“Yes; but trot away now, for I’ve no more time to spare,” said Tom, looking at his watch.

“Not to give me a kiss?”

Tom bent to kiss her cheek, and then said—

“There! Be a good girl. I’ve got a great deal to think of to-day. I’m going to have a long consultation with my uncle Deane this afternoon.”

“You’ll come to aunt Glegg’s to-morrow? We’re going all to dine early, that we may go there to tea. You *must* come: Lucy told me to say so.”

“O pooh! I’ve plenty else to do,” said Tom, pulling his bell violently, and bringing down the small bell-rope.

“I’m frightened—I shall run away,” said Maggie, making a laughing retreat; while Tom, with masculine philosophy, flung the bell-rope to the farther end of the room—not very far either: a touch of human experience which I flatter myself will come home to the bosoms of not a few substantial or distinguished men who were once at an early stage of their rise in the world, and were cherishing very large hopes in very small lodgings.

CHAPTER V

Showing That Tom Had Opened the Oyster

"And now we've settled this Newcastle business, Tom," said Mr. Deane, that same afternoon, as they were seated in the private room at the Bank together, "there's another matter I want to talk to you about. Since you're likely to have rather a smoky, unpleasant time of it at Newcastle for the next few weeks, you'll want a good prospect of some sort to keep up your spirits."

Tom waited less nervously than he had done on a former occasion in this apartment, while his uncle took out his snuff-box and gratified each nostril with deliberate impartiality.

"You see, Tom," said Mr. Deane, at last, throwing himself backward, "the world goes on at a smarter pace now than it did when I was a young fellow. Why, sir, forty years ago, when I was much such a strapping youngster as you, a man expected to pull between the shafts the best part of his life, before he got the whip in his hand. The looms went slowish, and fashions didn't alter quite so fast: I'd a best suit that lasted me six years. Everything was on a lower scale, sir—in point of expenditure, I mean. It's this steam, you see, that has made the difference: it drives on every wheel double pace, and the wheel of fortune along with 'em, as our Mr. Stephen Guest said at the anniversary dinner (he hits these things off wonderfully, considering he's seen nothing of business). I don't find fault with the change, as some people do. Trade, sir, opens a man's eyes; and if the population is to get thicker upon the ground, as it's doing, the world must use its wits at inventions of one sort or other. I know I've done my share as an ordinary man of business. Somebody has said it's a fine thing to make two ears of corn grow where only one grew before; but, sir, it's a fine thing, too, to further the exchange of commodities, and bring the grains of corn to the mouths that are hungry. And that's our line of business; and I

consider it as honourable a position as a man can hold, to be connected with it."

Tom knew that the affair his uncle had to speak of was not urgent; Mr. Deane was too shrewd and practical a man to allow either his reminiscences or his snuff to impede the progress of trade. Indeed, for the last month or two, there had been hints thrown out to Tom which enabled him to guess that he was going to hear some proposition for his own benefit. With the beginning of the last speech he had stretched out his legs, thrust his hands in his pockets, and prepared himself for some introductory diffuseness, tending to show that Mr. Deane had succeeded by his own merit, and that what he had to say to young men in general was, that if they didn't succeed too, it was because of their own demerit. He was rather surprised, then, when his uncle put a direct question to him.

"Let me see—it's going on for seven years now since you applied to me for a situation—eh, Tom?"

"Yes, sir; I'm three-and-twenty now," said Tom.

"Ah—it's as well not to say that, though: for you'd pass for a good deal older, and age tells well in business. I remember your coming very well: I remember I saw there was some pluck in you, and that was what made me give you encouragement. And I'm happy to say, I was right—I'm not often deceived. I was naturally a little shy at pushing my nephew, but I'm happy to say you've done me credit, sir; and if I'd had a son o' my own, I shouldn't have been sorry to see him like you."

Mr. Deane tapped his box and opened it again, repeating in a tone of some feeling—"No, I shouldn't have been sorry to see him like you."

"I'm very glad I've given you satisfaction, sir; I've done my best," said Tom, in his proud, independent way.

"Yes, Tom, you've given me satisfaction. I don't speak of your conduct as a son; though that weighs with me in my opinion of you. But what I have to do with, as a partner in our firm, is the qualities you've shown as a man o' business. Ours is a fine business—a

splendid concern, sir—and there's no reason why it shouldn't go on growing: there's a growing capital, and growing outlets for it; but there's another thing that's wanted for the prosperity of every concern, large or small, and that's men to conduct it—men of the right habits; none o' your flashy fellows, but such as are to be depended on. Now this is what Mr. Guest and I see clear enough. Three years ago, we took Gell into the concern: we gave him a share in the oil-mill. And why? Why, because Gell was a fellow whose services were worth a premium. So it will always be, sir. So it was with me. And though Gell is pretty near ten years older than you, there are other points in your favour."

Tom was getting a little nervous as Mr. Deane went on speaking; he was conscious of something he had in his mind to say, which might not be agreeable to his uncle, simply because it was a new suggestion rather than an acceptance of the proposition he foresaw.

"It stands to reason," Mr. Deane went on, when he had finished his new pinch, "that your being my nephew weighs in your favour; but I don't deny that if you'd been no relation of mine at all, your conduct in that affair of Pelley's bank would have led Mr. Guest and myself to make some acknowledgment of the service you've been to us; and, backed by your general conduct and business ability, it has made us determine on giving you a share in the business—a share which we shall be glad to increase as the years go on. We think that'll be better, on all grounds, than raising your salary. It'll give you more importance, and prepare you better for taking some of the anxiety off my shoulders by-and-by. I'm equal to a good deal o' work at present, thank God; but I'm getting older—there's no denying that. I told Mr. Guest I would open the subject to you; and when you come back from this northern business, we can go into particulars. This is a great stride for a young fellow of three-and-twenty, but I'm bound to say you've deserved it."

"I'm very grateful to Mr. Guest and you, sir; of course I feel the most indebted to *you*, who first took me into the business, and have taken a good deal of pains with me since."

Tom spoke with a slight tremor, and paused after he had said this.

“Yes, yes,” said Mr. Deane. “I don’t spare pains when I see they’ll be of any use. I gave myself some trouble with Gell—else he wouldn’t have been what he is.”

“But there’s one thing I should like to mention to you, uncle. I’ve never spoken to you of it before. If you remember, at the time my father’s property was sold, there was some thought of your firm buying the Mill: I know you thought it would be a very good investment, especially if steam were applied.”

“To be sure, to be sure. But Wakem outbid us—he’d made up his mind to that. He’s rather fond of carrying everything over other people’s heads.”

“Perhaps it’s of no use my mentioning it at present,” Tom went on, “but I wish you to know what I have in my mind about the Mill. I’ve a strong feeling about it. It was my father’s dying wish that I should try and get it back again whenever I could: it was in his family for five generations. I promised my father; and besides that, I’m attached to the place. I shall never like any other so well. And if it should ever suit your views to buy it for the firm, I should have a better chance of fulfilling my father’s wish. I shouldn’t have liked to mention the thing to you, only you’ve been kind enough to say my services have been of some value. And I’d give up a much greater chance in life for the sake of having the Mill again—I mean, having it in my own hands, and gradually working off the price.”

Mr. Deane had listened attentively, and now looked thoughtful.

“I see, I see,” he said, after a while; “the thing would be possible, if there were any chance of Wakem’s parting with the property. But that I *don’t* see. He’s put that young Jetsome in the place; and he had his reasons when he bought it, I’ll be bound.”

“He’s a loose fish, that young Jetsome,” said Tom. “He’s taking to drinking, and they say he’s letting the business go down. Luke told me about it—our old miller. He says, he shan’t stay unless there’s an alteration. I was thinking, if things went on in that way, Wakem might be more willing to part with the Mill. Luke says he’s getting very sour about the way things are going on.”

“Well, I’ll turn it over, Tom. I must inquire into the matter, and go into it with Mr. Guest. But, you see, it’s rather striking out a new branch, and putting you to that, instead of keeping you where you are, which was what we’d wanted.”

“I should be able to manage more than the mill when things were once set properly going, sir. I want to have plenty of work. There’s nothing else I care about much.”

There was something rather sad in that speech from a young man of three-and-twenty, even in uncle Deane’s business-loving ears.

“Pooh, pooh! you’ll be having a wife to care about one of these days, if you get on at this pace in the world. But as to this Mill, we mustn’t reckon on our chickens too early. However, I promise you to bear it in mind, and when you come back we’ll talk of it again. I am going to dinner now. Come and breakfast with us to-morrow morning, and say good-bye to your mother and sister before you start.”

CHAPTER VI

Illustrating the Laws of Attraction

It is evident to you now, that Maggie had arrived at a moment in her life which must be considered by all prudent persons as a great opportunity for a young woman. Launched into the higher society of St. Ogg's, with a striking person, which had the advantage of being quite unfamiliar to the majority of beholders, and with such moderate assistance of costume as you have seen foreshadowed in Lucy's anxious colloquy with aunt Pullet, Maggie was certainly at a new starting-point in life. At Lucy's first evening-party, young Torry fatigued his facial muscles more than usual in order that "the dark-eyed girl there, in the corner," might see him in all the additional style conferred by his eye-glass; and several young ladies went home intending to have short sleeves with black lace, and to plait their hair in a broad coronet at the back of their head—"That cousin of Miss Deane's looked so very well." In fact, poor Maggie, with all her inward consciousness of a painful past and her presentiment of a troublous future, was on the way to become an object of some envy —a topic of discussion in the newly-established billiard-room, and between fair friends who had no secrets from each other on the subject of trimmings. The Miss Guests, who associated chiefly on terms of condescension with the families of St. Ogg's, and were the glass of fashion there, took some exception to Maggie's manners. She had a way of not assenting at once to the observations current in good society, and of saying that she didn't know whether those observations were true or not, which gave her an air of *gaucherie*, and impeded the even flow of conversation; but it is a fact capable of an amiable interpretation, that ladies are not the worst disposed towards a new acquaintance of their own sex because she has points of inferiority. And Maggie was so entirely without those pretty airs of coquetry which had the traditional reputation of driving gentlemen to despair, that she won some feminine pity for being so

ineffective in spite of her beauty. She had not had many advantages, poor thing! and it must be admitted there was no pretension about her: her abruptness and unevenness of manner were plainly the result of her secluded and lowly circumstances. It was only a wonder that there was no tinge of vulgarity about her, considering what the rest of poor Lucy's relations were: an allusion which always made the Miss Guests shudder a little. It was not agreeable to think of any connection by marriage with such people as the Gleggs and the Pullets; but it was of no use to contradict Stephen, when once he had set his mind on anything, and certainly there was no possible objection to Lucy in herself—no one could help liking her. She would naturally desire that the Miss Guests should behave kindly to this cousin of whom she was so fond, and Stephen would make a great fuss if they were deficient in civility. Under these circumstances the invitations to Park House were not wanting; and elsewhere, also, Miss Deane was too popular and too distinguished a member of society in St. Ogg's for any attention towards her to be neglected.

Thus Maggie was introduced for the first time to the young lady's life, and knew what it was to get up in the morning without any imperative reason for doing one thing more than another. This new sense of leisure and unchecked enjoyment amidst the soft-breathing airs and garden-scents of advancing spring—amidst the new abundance of music, and lingering strolls in the sunshine, and the delicious dreaminess of gliding on the river—could hardly be without some intoxicating effect on her, after her years of privation; and even in the first week Maggie began to be less haunted by her sad memories and anticipations. Life was certainly very pleasant just now: it was becoming very pleasant to dress in the evening, and to feel that she was one of the beautiful things of this spring-time. And there were admiring eyes always awaiting her now; she was no longer an unheeded person, liable to be chid, from whom attention was continually claimed, and on whom no one felt bound to confer any. It was pleasant, too, when Stephen and Lucy were gone out riding, to sit down at the piano alone, and find that the old fitness

between her fingers and the keys remained, and revived, like a sympathetic kinship not to be worn out by separation—to get the tunes she had heard the evening before, and repeat them again and again until she had found out a way of producing them so as to make them a more pregnant, passionate language to her. The mere concord of octaves was a delight to Maggie, and she would often take up a book of studies rather than any melody, that she might taste more keenly by abstraction the more primitive sensation of intervals. Not that her enjoyment of music was of the kind that indicates a great specific talent; it was rather that her sensibility to the supreme excitement of music was only one form of that passionate sensibility which belonged to her whole nature, and made her faults and virtues all merge in each other—made her affections sometimes an impatient demand, but also prevented her vanity from taking the form of mere feminine coquetry and device, and gave it the poetry of ambition. But you have known Maggie a long while, and need to be told, not her characteristics, but her history, which is a thing hardly to be predicted even from the completest knowledge of characteristics. For the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within. “Character,” says Novalis, in one of his questionable aphorisms—“character is destiny.” But not the whole of our destiny. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, was speculative and irresolute, and we have a great tragedy in consequence. But if his father had lived to a good old age, and his uncle had died an early death, we can conceive Hamlet’s having married Ophelia, and got through life with a reputation of sanity, notwithstanding many soliloquies, and some moody sarcasms towards the fair daughter of Polonius, to say nothing of the frankest incivility to his father-in-law.

Maggie’s destiny, then, is at present hidden, and we must wait for it to reveal itself like the course of an unmapped river: we only know that the river is full and rapid, and that for all rivers there is the same final home. Under the charm of her new pleasures, Maggie herself was ceasing to think, with her eager prefiguring imagination, of her future lot; and her anxiety about her first interview with

Philip was losing its predominance: perhaps, unconsciously to herself, she was not sorry that the interview had been deferred.

For Philip had not come the evening he was expected, and Mr. Stephen Guest brought word that he was gone to the coast—probably, he thought, on a sketching expedition; but it was not certain when he would return. It was just like Philip—to go off in that way without telling any one. It was not until the twelfth day that he returned, to find both Lucy's notes awaiting him: he had left before he knew of Maggie's arrival.

Perhaps one had need be nineteen again to be quite convinced of the feelings that were crowded for Maggie into those twelve days—of the length to which they were stretched for her by the novelty of her experience in them, and the varying attitudes of her mind. The early days of an acquaintance almost always have this importance for us, and fill up a larger space in our memory than longer subsequent periods, which have been less filled with discovery and new impressions. There were not many hours in those ten days in which Mr. Stephen Guest was not seated by Lucy's side, or standing near her at the piano, or accompanying her on some out-door excursion: his attentions were clearly becoming more assiduous; and that was what every one had expected. Lucy was very happy: all the happier because Stephen's society seemed to have become much more interesting and amusing since Maggie had been there. Playful discussions—sometimes serious ones—were going forward, in which both Stephen and Maggie revealed themselves, to the admiration of the gentle unobtrusive Lucy; and it more than once crossed her mind what a charming quartet they should have through life when Maggie married Philip. Is it an inexplicable thing that a girl should enjoy her lover's society the more for the presence of a third person, and be without the slightest spasm of jealousy that the third person had the conversation habitually directed to her? Not when that girl is as tranquil-hearted as Lucy, thoroughly possessed with a belief that she knows the state of her companions' affections, and not prone to the feelings which shake such a belief in the absence of positive evidence against it. Besides, it was Lucy by whom Stephen

sat, to whom he gave his arm, to whom he appealed as the person sure to agree with him; and every day there was the same tender politeness towards her, the same consciousness of her wants and care to supply them. Was there really the same?— it seemed to Lucy that there was more; and it was no wonder that the real significance of the change escaped her. It was a subtle act of conscience in Stephen that even he himself was not aware of. His personal attentions to Maggie were comparatively slight, and there had even sprung up an apparent distance between them, that prevented the renewal of that faint resemblance to gallantry into which he had fallen the first day in the boat. If Stephen came in when Lucy was out of the room—if Lucy left them together, they never spoke to each other: Stephen, perhaps, seemed to be examining books on music, and Maggie bent her head assiduously over her work. Each was oppressively conscious of the other's presence, even to the finger-ends. Yet each looked and longed for the same thing to happen the next day. Neither of them had begun to reflect on the matter, or silently to ask, "To what does all this tend?" Maggie only felt that life was revealing something quite new to her; and she was absorbed in the direct, immediate experience, without any energy left for taking account of it and reasoning about it. Stephen wilfully abstained from self-questioning, and would not admit to himself that he felt an influence which was to have any determining effect on his conduct. And when Lucy came into the room again, they were once more unconstrained: Maggie could contradict Stephen and laugh at him, and he could recommend to her consideration the example of that most charming heroine, Miss Sophia Western, who had a great "respect for the understandings of men." Maggie could look at Stephen—which, for some reason or other, she always avoided when they were alone; and he could even ask her to play his accompaniment for him, since Lucy's fingers were so busy with that bazaar-work; and lecture her on hurrying the *tempo*, which was certainly Maggie's weak point.

One day—it was the day of Philip's return—Lucy had formed a sudden engagement to spend the evening with Mrs. Kenn, whose

delicate state of health, threatening to become confirmed illness through an attack of bronchitis, obliged her to resign her functions at the coming bazaar into the hands of other ladies, of whom she wished Lucy to be one. The engagement had been formed in Stephen's presence, and he had heard Lucy promise to dine early and call at six o'clock for Miss Torry, who brought Mrs. Kenn's request.

"Here is another of the moral results of this idiotic bazaar," Stephen burst forth, as soon as Miss Torry had left the room —"taking young ladies from the duties of the domestic hearth into scenes of dissipation among urn-rugs and embroidered reticules! I should like to know what is the proper function of women, if it is not to make reasons for husbands to stay at home, and still stronger reasons for bachelors to go out. If this goes on much longer, the bonds of society will be dissolved."

"Well, it will not go on much longer," said Lucy, laughing, "for the bazaar is to take place on Monday week."

"Thank heaven!" said Stephen. "Kenn himself said the other day, that he didn't like this plan of making vanity do the work of charity; but just as the British public is not reasonable enough to bear direct taxation, so St. Ogg's has not got force of motive enough to build and endow schools without calling in the force of folly."

"Did he say so?" said little Lucy, her hazel eyes opening wide with anxiety. "I never heard him say anything of that kind: I thought he approved of what we were doing."

"I'm sure he approves *you,"* said Stephen, smiling at her affectionately; "your conduct in going out to-night looks vicious, I own, but I know there is benevolence at the bottom of it."

"O, you think too well of me," said Lucy, shaking her head, with a pretty blush, and there the subject ended. But it was tacitly understood that Stephen would not come in the evening, and on the strength of that tacit understanding he made his morning visit the longer, not saying good-bye until after four.

Maggie was seated in the drawing-room alone, shortly after dinner, with Minny on her lap, having left her uncle to his wine and his nap, and her mother to the compromise between knitting and nodding, which, when there was no company, she always carried on in the dining-room till tea-time. Maggie was stooping to caress the tiny silken pet, and comforting him for his mistress's absence, when the sound of a footstep on the gravel made her look up, and she saw Mr. Stephen Guest walking up the garden, as if he had come straight from the river. It was very unusual to see him so soon after dinner! He often complained that their dinner-hour was late at Park House. Nevertheless, there he was, in his black dress: he had evidently been home, and must have come again by the river. Maggie felt her cheeks glowing and her heart beating: it was natural she should be nervous, for she was not accustomed to receive visitors alone. He had seen her look up through the open window, and raised his hat as he walked towards it, to enter that way instead of by the door. He blushed too, and certainly looked as foolish as a young man of some wit and self-possession can be expected to look, as he walked in with a roll of music in his hand, and said, with an air of hesitating improvisation—

"You are surprised to see me again, Miss Tulliver—I ought to apologise for coming upon you by surprise, but I wanted to come into the town, and I got our man to row me; so I thought I would bring these things from the 'Maid of Artois' for your cousin: I forgot them this morning. Will you give them to her?"

"Yes," said Maggie, who had risen confusedly with Minny in her arms, and now, not quite knowing what else to do, sat down again.

Stephen laid down his hat, with the music, which rolled on the floor, and sat down in the chair close by her. He had never done so before, and both he and Maggie were quite aware that it was an entirely new position.

"Well, you pampered minion!" said Stephen, leaning to pull the long curly ears that drooped over Maggie's arm. It was not a suggestive remark, and as the speaker did not follow it up by further development, it naturally left the conversation at a stand-still. It

seemed to Stephen like some action in a dream, that he was obliged to do, and wonder at himself all the while—to go on stroking Minny's head. Yet it was very pleasant: he only wished he dared look at Maggie, and that she would look at him—let him have one long look into those deep strange eyes of hers, and then he would be satisfied, and quite reasonable after that. He thought it was becoming a sort of monomania with him, to want that long look from Maggie; and he was racking his invention continually to find out some means by which he could have it without its appearing singular and entailing subsequent embarrassment. As for Maggie, she had no distinct thought—only the sense of a presence like that of a closely-hovering broad-winged bird in the darkness, for she was unable to look up, and saw nothing but Minny's black wavy coat.

But this must end some time—perhaps it ended very soon, and only *seemed* long, as a minute's dream does. Stephen at last sat upright sideways in his chair, leaning one hand and arm over the back and looking at Maggie. What should he say?

"We shall have a splendid sunset, I think; shan't you go out and see it?"

"I don't know," said Maggie. Then, courageously raising her eyes and looking out of the window, "If I'm not playing cribbage with my uncle."

A pause: during which Minny is stroked again, but has sufficient insight not to be grateful for it—to growl rather.

"Do you like sitting alone?"

A rather arch look came over Maggie's face, and, just glancing at Stephen, she said, "Would it be quite civil to say 'yes'?"

"It *was* rather a dangerous question for an intruder to ask," said Stephen, delighted with that glance, and getting determined to stay for another. "But you will have more than half an hour to yourself after I am gone," he added, taking out his watch. "I know Mr. Deane never comes in till half-past seven."

Another pause, during which Maggie looked steadily out of the window, till by a great effort she moved her head to look down at

Minny's back again, and said—

"I wish Lucy had not been obliged to go out. We lose our music."

"We shall have a new voice to-morrow night," said Stephen. "Will you tell your cousin that our friend Philip Wakem is come back? I saw him as I went home."

Maggie gave a little start—it seemed hardly more than a vibration that passed from head to foot in an instant. But the new images summoned by Philip's name, dispersed half the oppressive spell she had been under. She rose from her chair with a sudden resolution, and, laying Minny on his cushion, went to reach Lucy's large work-basket from its corner. Stephen was vexed and disappointed: he thought, perhaps Maggie didn't like the name of Wakem to be mentioned to her in that abrupt way—for he now recalled what Lucy had told him of the family quarrel. It was of no use to stay any longer. Maggie was seating herself at the table with her work, and looking chill and proud: and he—he looked like a simpleton for having come. A gratuitous, entirely superfluous visit of that sort was sure to make a man disagreeable and ridiculous. Of course it was palpable to Maggie's thinking, that he had dined hastily in his own room for the sake of setting off again and finding her alone.

A boyish state of mind for an accomplished young gentleman of five-and-twenty, not without legal knowledge! But a reference to history, perhaps, may make it not incredible.

At this moment Maggie's ball of knitting-wool rolled along the ground, and she started up to reach it. Stephen rose too, and, picking up the ball, met her with a vexed complaining look that gave his eyes quite a new expression to Maggie, whose own eyes met them as he presented the ball to her.

"Good-bye," said Stephen, in a tone that had the same beseeching discontent as his eyes. He dared not put out his hand—he thrust both hands into his tail-pockets as he spoke. Maggie thought she had perhaps been rude.

"Won't you stay?" she said timidly, not looking away, for that would have seemed rude again.

“No, thank you,” said Stephen, looking still into the half-unwilling, half-fascinated eyes, as a thirsty man looks towards the track of the distant brook. “The boat is waiting for me … You’ll tell your cousin?”

“Yes.”

“That I brought the music, I mean?”

“Yes.”

“And that Philip is come back.”

“Yes.” (Maggie did not notice Philip’s name this time.)

“Won’t you come out a little way into the garden?” said Stephen, in a still gentler tone, but the next moment he was vexed that she did not say “No,” for she moved away now towards the open window, and he was obliged to take his hat and walk by her side. But he thought of something to make him amends.

“Do take my arm,” he said, in a low tone, as if it were a secret.

There is something strangely winning to most women in that offer of the firm arm: the help is not wanted physically at that moment, but the sense of help—the presence of strength that is outside them and yet theirs—meets a continual want of the imagination. Either on that ground or some other, Maggie took the arm. And they walked together round the grass plot and under the drooping green of the laburnums, in the same dim dreamy state as they had been in a quarter of an hour before; only that Stephen had had the look he longed for, without yet perceiving in himself the symptoms of returning reasonableness, and Maggie had darting thoughts across the dimness:—how came she to be there?—why had she come out? Not a word was spoken. If it had been, each would have been less intensely conscious of the other.

“Take care of this step,” said Stephen, at last.

“O, I will go in now,” said Maggie, feeling that the step had come like a rescue. “Good evening.”

In an instant she had withdrawn her arm, and was running back to the house. She did not reflect that this sudden action would only

add to the embarrassing recollections of the last half-hour. She had no thought left for that. She only threw herself into the low armchair, and burst into tears.

“O Philip, Philip, I wish we were together again—so quietly—in the Red Deeps.”

Stephen looked after her a moment, then went on to the boat, and was soon landed at the wharf. He spent the evening in the billiard-room, smoking one cigar after another, and losing “lives” at pool. But he would not leave off. He was determined not to think—not to admit any more distinct remembrance than was urged upon him by the perpetual presence of Maggie. He was looking at her, and she was on his arm.

But there came the necessity of walking home in the cool starlight, and with it the necessity of cursing his own folly, and bitterly determining that he would never trust himself alone with Maggie again. It was all madness: he was in love, thoroughly attached to Lucy, and engaged—engaged as strongly as an honourable man need be. He wished he had never seen this Maggie Tulliver, to be thrown into a fever by her in this way: she would make a sweet, strange, troublesome, adorable wife to some man or other, but he would never have chosen her himself. Did she feel as he did? He hoped she did—not. He ought not to have gone. He would master himself in future. He would make himself disagreeable to her—quarrel with her perhaps. Quarrel with her? Was it possible to quarrel with a creature who had such eyes—defying and deprecating, contradicting and clinging, imperious and beseeching—full of delicious opposites. To see such a creature subdued by love for one would be a lot worth having—to another man.

There was a muttered exclamation which ended this inward soliloquy, as Stephen threw away the end of his last cigar, and thrusting his hands into his pockets, stalked along at a quieter pace through the shrubbery. It was not of a benedictory kind.

CHAPTER VII

Philip Re-enters

The next morning was very wet: the sort of morning on which male neighbours who have no imperative occupation at home are likely to pay their fair friends an illimitable visit. The rain, which has been endurable enough for the walk or ride one way, is sure to become so heavy, and at the same time so certain to clear up by-and-by, that nothing but an open quarrel can abbreviate the visit: latent detestation will not do at all. And if people happen to be lovers, what can be so delightful, in England, as a rainy morning? English sunshine is dubious; bonnets are never quite secure; and if you sit down on the grass, it may lead to catarrhs. But the rain is to be depended on. You gallop through it in a mackintosh, and presently find yourself in the seat you like best—a little above or a little below the one on which your goddess sits (it is the same thing to the metaphysical mind, and that is the reason why women are at once worshipped and looked down upon), with a satisfactory confidence that there will be no lady-callers.

"Stephen will come earlier this morning, I know," said Lucy: "he always does when it's rainy."

Maggie made no answer. She was angry with Stephen: she began to think she should dislike him; and if it had not been for the rain, she would have gone to her aunt Glegg's this morning, and so have avoided him altogether. As it was, she must find some reason for remaining out of the room with her mother.

But Stephen did not come earlier, and there was another visitor—a nearer neighbour—who preceded him. When Philip entered the room, he was going merely to bow to Maggie, feeling that their acquaintance was a secret which he was bound not to betray; but when she advanced towards him and put out her hand, he guessed at once that Lucy had been taken into her confidence. It was a

moment of some agitation to both, though Philip had spent many hours in preparing for it; but like all persons who have passed through life with little expectation of sympathy, he seldom lost his self-control, and shrank with the most sensitive pride from any noticeable betrayal of emotion. A little extra paleness, a little tension of the nostril when he spoke, and the voice pitched in rather a higher key, that to strangers would seem expressive of cold indifference, were all the signs Philip usually gave of an inward drama that was not without its fierceness. But Maggie, who had little more power of concealing the impressions made upon her than if she had been constructed of musical strings, felt her eyes getting larger with tears as they took each other's hands in silence. They were not painful tears: they had rather something of the same origin as the tears women and children shed when they have found some protection to cling to, and look back on the threatened danger. For Philip, who a little while ago was associated continually in Maggie's mind with the sense that Tom might reproach her with some justice, had now, in this short space, become a sort of outward conscience to her, that she might fly to for rescue and strength. Her tranquil, tender affection for Philip, with its root deep down in her childhood, and its memories of long quiet talk confirming by distinct successive impressions the first instinctive bias—the fact that in him the appeal was more strongly to her pity and womanly devotedness than to her vanity or other egoistic excitability of her nature, seemed now to make a sort of sacred place, a sanctuary where she could find refuge from an alluring influence which the best part of herself must resist, which must bring horrible tumult within, wretchedness without. This new sense of her relation to Philip nullified the anxious scruples she would otherwise have felt, lest she should overstep the limit of intercourse with him that Tom would sanction; and she put out her hand to him, and felt the tears in her eyes without any consciousness of an inward check. The scene was just what Lucy expected, and her kind heart delighted in bringing Philip and Maggie together again; though, even with all *her* regard for Philip, she could not resist the impression that her cousin Tom had some excuse for feeling shocked at the physical

incongruity between the two—a prosaic person like cousin Tom, who didn't like poetry and fairy tales. But she began to speak as soon as possible, to set them at ease.

"This was very good and virtuous of you," she said, in her pretty treble, like the low conversational notes of little birds, "to come so soon after your arrival. And as it is, I think I will pardon you for running away in an inopportune manner, and giving your friends no notice. Come and sit down here," she went on, placing the chair that would suit him best, "and you shall find yourself treated mercifully."

"You will never govern well, Miss Deane," said Philip as he seated himself, "because no one will ever believe in your severity. People will always encourage themselves in misdemeanours by the certainty that you will be indulgent."

Lucy gave some playful contradiction, but Philip did not hear what it was, for he had naturally turned towards Maggie, and she was looking at him with that open, affectionate scrutiny, which we give to a friend from whom we have been long separated. What a moment their parting had been! And Philip felt as if he were only in the morrow of it. He felt this so keenly—with such intense, detailed remembrance—with such passionate revival of all that had been said and looked in their last conversation—that with that jealousy and distrust which in diffident natures is almost inevitably linked with a strong feeling, he thought he read in Maggie's glance and manner the evidence of a change. The very fact that he feared and half expected it, would be sure to make this thought rush in, in the absence of positive proof to the contrary.

"I am having a great holiday, am I not?" said Maggie. "Lucy is like a fairy godmother: she has turned me from a drudge into a princess in no time. I do nothing but indulge myself all day long, and she always finds out what I want before I know it myself."

"I'm sure she is the happier for having you, then," said Philip. "You must be better than a whole menagerie of pets to her. And you look well—you are benefiting by the change."

Artificial conversation of this sort went on a little while, till Lucy, determined to put an end to it, exclaimed, with a good imitation of annoyance, that she had forgotten something, and was quickly out of the room.

In a moment Maggie and Philip leaned forward, and the hands were clasped again, with a look of sad contentment like that of friends who meet in the memory of recent sorrow.

“I told my brother I wished to see you, Philip—I asked him to release me from my promise, and he consented.”

Maggie, in her impulsiveness, wanted Philip to know at once the position they must hold towards each other; but she checked herself. The things that had happened since he had spoken of his love for her were so painful that she shrank from being the first to allude to them. It seemed almost like an injury towards Philip even to mention her brother—her brother who had insulted him. But he was thinking too entirely of her to be sensitive on any other point at that moment.

“Then we can at least be friends, Maggie? There is nothing to hinder that now?”

“Will not your father object?” said Maggie, withdrawing her hand.

“I should not give you up on any ground but your own wish, Maggie,” said Philip, colouring. “There are points on which I should always resist my father, as I used to tell you. *That* is one.”

“Then there is nothing to hinder our being friends, Philip—seeing each other and talking to each other while I am here: I shall soon go away again. I mean to go very soon—to a new situation.”

“Is that inevitable, Maggie?”

“Yes: I must not stay here long. It would unfit me for the life I must begin again at last. I can’t live in dependence—I can’t live with my brother—though he is very good to me. He would like to provide for me; but that would be intolerable to me.”

Philip was silent a few moments, and then said, in that high, feeble voice which with him indicated the resolute suppression of

emotion:—

“Is there no other alternative, Maggie? Is that life, away from those who love you, the only one you will allow yourself to look forward to?”

“Yes, Philip,” she said, looking at him pleadingly, as if she entreated him to believe that she was compelled to this course. “At least, as things are; I don’t know what may be in years to come. But I begin to think there can never come much happiness to me from loving: I have always had so much pain mingled with it. I wish I could make myself a world outside it, as men do.”

“Now, you are returning to your old thought in a new form, Maggie—the thought I used to combat,” said Philip, with a slight tinge of bitterness. “You want to find out a mode of renunciation that will be an escape from pain. I tell you again, there is no such escape possible except by perverting or mutilating one’s nature. What would become of me, if I tried to escape from pain? Scorn and cynicism would be my only opium; unless I could fall into some kind of conceited madness, and fancy myself a favourite of Heaven because I am not a favourite with men.”

The bitterness had taken on some impetuosity as Philip went on speaking: the words were evidently an outlet for some immediate feeling of his own, as well as an answer to Maggie. There was a pain pressing on him at that moment. He shrank with proud delicacy from the faintest allusion to the words of love—of plighted love that had passed between them. It would have seemed to him like reminding Maggie of a promise; it would have had for him something of the baseness of compulsion. He could not dwell on the fact that he himself had not changed; for that too would have had the air of an appeal. His love for Maggie was stamped, even more than the rest of his experience, with the exaggerated sense that he was an exception—that she, that every one, saw him in the light of an exception.

But Maggie was conscience-stricken.

“Yes, Philip,” she said, with her childish contrition when he used to chide her, “you are right, I know. I do always think too much of my own feelings, and not enough of others’—not enough of yours. I had need have you always to find fault with me and teach me: so many things have come true that you used to tell me.”

Maggie was resting her elbow on the table, leaning her head on her hand and looking at Philip with half-penitent dependent affection, as she said this; while he was returning her gaze with an expression that, to her consciousness, gradually became less vague—became charged with a specific recollection. Had his mind flown back to something that *she* now remembered?—something about a lover of Lucy’s? It was a thought that made her shudder: it gave new definiteness to her present position, and to the tendency of what had happened the evening before. She moved her arm from the table, urged to change her position by that positive physical oppression at the heart that sometimes accompanies a sudden mental pang.

“What is the matter, Maggie? Has something happened?” Philip said, in inexpressible anxiety—his imagination being only too ready to weave everything that was fatal to them both.

“No—nothing,” said Maggie, rousing her latent will. Philip must not have that odious thought in his mind: she would banish it from her own. “Nothing,” she repeated, “except in my own mind. You used to say I should feel the effect of my starved life, as you called it, and I do. I am too eager in my enjoyment of music and all luxuries, now they are come to me.”

She took up her work and occupied herself resolutely, while Philip watched her, really in doubt whether she had anything more than this general allusion in her mind. It was quite in Maggie’s character to be agitated by vague self-reproach. But soon there came a violent well-known ring at the door-bell resounding through the house.

“O what a startling announcement!” said Maggie, quite mistress of herself, though not without some inward flutter. “I wonder where

Lucy is."

Lucy had not been deaf to the signal, and after an interval long enough for a few solicitous but not hurried inquiries, she herself ushered Stephen in.

"Well, old fellow," he said, going straight up to Philip and shaking him heartily by the hand, bowing to Maggie in passing, "it's glorious to have you back again; only I wish you'd conduct yourself a little less like a sparrow with a residence on the house-top, and not go in and out constantly without letting the servants know. This is about the twentieth time I've had to scamper up those countless stairs to that painting-room of yours, all to no purpose, because your people thought you were at home. Such incidents embitter friendship."

"I've so few visitors—it seems hardly worth while to leave notice of my exit and entrances," said Philip, feeling rather oppressed just then by Stephen's bright strong presence and strong voice.

"Are you quite well this morning, Miss Tulliver?" said Stephen, turning to Maggie with stiff politeness, and putting out his hand with the air of fulfilling a social duty.

Maggie gave the tips of her fingers, and said, "Quite well, thank you," in a tone of proud indifference. Philip's eyes were watching them keenly; but Lucy was used to seeing variations in their manner to each other, and only thought with regret that there was some natural antipathy which every now and then surmounted their mutual goodwill. "Maggie is not the sort of woman Stephen admires, and she is irritated by something in him which she interprets as conceit," was the silent observation that accounted for everything to guileless Lucy. Stephen and Maggie had no sooner completed this studied greeting than each felt hurt by the other's coldness. And Stephen, while rattling on in questions to Philip about his recent sketching expedition, was thinking all the more about Maggie because he was not drawing her into the conversation as he had invariably done before. "Maggie and Philip are not looking happy," thought Lucy: "this first interview has been saddening to them."

“I think we people who have not been galloping,” she said to Stephen, “are all a little damped by the rain. Let us have some music. We ought to take advantage of having Philip and you together. Give us the duet in ‘Masaniello:’ Maggie has not heard that, and I know it will suit her.”

“Come, then,” said Stephen, going towards the piano, and giving a foretaste of the tune in his deep “brum brum,” very pleasant to hear.

“You, please, Philip—you play the accompaniment,” said Lucy, “and then I can go on with my work. You *will* like to play, shan’t you?” she added, with a pretty inquiring look, anxious, as usual, lest she should have proposed what was not pleasant to another; but with yearnings towards her unfinished embroidery.

Philip had brightened at the proposition, for there is no feeling, perhaps, except the extremes of fear and grief, that does not find relief in music—that does not make a man sing or play the better; and Philip had an abundance of pent-up feeling at this moment, as complex as any trio or quartet that was ever meant to express love and jealousy, and resignation and fierce suspicion, all at the same time.

“O yes,” he said, seating himself at the piano, “it is a way of eking out one’s imperfect life and being three people at once—to sing and make the piano sing, and hear them both all the while—or else to sing and paint.”

“Ah, there you are an enviable fellow. I can do nothing with my hands,” said Stephen. “That has generally been observed in men of great administrative capacity, I believe. A tendency to predominance of the reflective powers in me!—haven’t you observed that, Miss Tulliver?”

Stephen had fallen by mistake into his habit of playful appeal to Maggie, and she could not repress the answering flush and epigram.

“I *have* observed a tendency to predominance,” she said, smiling; and Philip at that moment devoutly hoped that she found the tendency disagreeable.

“Come, come,” said Lucy; “music, music! We will discuss each other’s qualities another time.”

Maggie always tried in vain to go on with her work when music began. She tried harder than ever to-day; for the thought that Stephen knew how much she cared for his singing was one that no longer roused a merely playful resistance; and she knew, too, that it was his habit always to stand so that he could look at her. But it was of no use: she soon threw her work down, and all her intentions were lost in the vague state of emotion produced by the inspiring duet—emotion that seemed to make her at once strong and weak: strong for all enjoyment, weak for all resistance. When the strain passed into the minor, she half-started from her seat with the sudden thrill of that change. Poor Maggie! She looked very beautiful when her soul was being played on in this way by the inexorable power of sound. You might have seen the slightest perceptible quivering through her whole frame as she leaned a little forward, clasping her hands as if to steady herself; while her eyes dilated and brightened into that wide-open, childish expression of wondering delight, which always came back in her happiest moments. Lucy, who at other times had always been at the piano when Maggie was looking in this way, could not resist the impulse to steal up to her and kiss her. Philip, too, caught a glimpse of her now and then round the open book on the desk, and felt that he had never before seen her under so strong an influence.

“More, more!” said Lucy, when the duet had been encored. “Something spirited again. Maggie always says she likes a great rush of sound.”

“It must be ‘Let us take the road,’ then,” said Stephen—“so suitable for a wet morning. But are you prepared to abandon the most sacred duties of life, and come and sing with us?”

“O yes,” said Lucy, laughing. “If you will look out the ‘Beggar’s Opera’ from the large canterbury. It has a dingy cover.”

“That is a great clue, considering there are about a score covers here of rival dinginess,” said Stephen, drawing out the canterbury.

“O, play something the while, Philip,” said Lucy, noticing that his fingers were wandering over the keys. “What is that you are falling into?—something delicious that I don’t know.”

“Don’t you know that?” said Philip, bringing out the tune more definitely. “It’s from the *Somnámbula*—‘Ah! perchè non posso odiarti.’ I don’t know the opera, but it appears the tenor is telling the heroine that he shall always love her though she may forsake him. You’ve heard me sing it to the English words, ‘I love thee still.’ ”

It was not quite unintentionally that Philip had wandered into this song, which might be an indirect expression to Maggie of what he could not prevail on himself to say to her directly. Her ears had been open to what he was saying, and when he began to sing, she understood the plaintive passion of the music. That pleading tenor had no very fine qualities as a voice, but it was not quite new to her: it had sung to her by snatches, in a subdued way, among the grassy walks and hollows, and underneath the leaning ash-tree in the Red Deeps. There seemed to be some reproach in the words—did Philip mean that? She wished she had assured him more distinctly in their conversation that she desired not to renew the hope of love between them, *only* because it clashed with her inevitable circumstances. She was touched, not thrilled by the song: it suggested distinct memories and thoughts, and brought quiet regret in the place of excitement.

“That’s the way with you tenors,” said Stephen, who was waiting with music in his hand while Philip finished the song. “You demoralise the fair sex by warbling your sentimental love and constancy under all sorts of vile treatment. Nothing short of having your heads served up in a dish like that mediaeval tenor or troubadour, would prevent you from expressing your entire resignation. I must administer an antidote, while Miss Deane prepares to tear herself away from her bobbins.”

Stephen rolled out, with saucy energy—

> “Shall I, wasting in despair,
> Die because a woman’s fair?”

and seemed to make all the air in the room alive with a new influence. Lucy, always proud of what Stephen did, went towards the piano with laughing, admiring looks at him; and Maggie, in spite of her resistance to the spirit of the song and to the singer, was taken hold of and shaken by the invisible influence—was borne along by a wave too strong for her.

But, angrily resolved not to betray herself, she seized her work, and went on making false stitches and pricking her fingers with much perseverance, not looking up or taking notice of what was going forward, until all the three voices united in "Let us take the road."

I am afraid there would have been a subtle, stealing gratification in her mind if she had known how entirely this saucy, defiant Stephen was occupied with her: how he was passing rapidly from a determination to treat her with ostentatious indifference to an irritating desire for some sign of inclination from her—some interchange of subdued word or look with her. It was not long before he found an opportunity, when they had passed to the music of "The Tempest." Maggie, feeling the need of a footstool, was walking across the room to get one, when Stephen, who was not singing just then, and was conscious of all her movements, guessed her want, and flew to anticipate her, lifting the footstool with an entreating look at her, which made it impossible not to return a glance of gratitude. And then, to have the footstool placed carefully by a too self-confident personage—not *any* self-confident personage, but one in particular, who suddenly looks humble and anxious, and lingers, bending still, to ask if there is not some draught in that position between the window and the fireplace, and if he may not be allowed to move the work-table for her—these things will summon a little of the too-ready, traitorous tenderness into a woman's eyes, compelled as she is in her girlish time to learn her life-lessons in very trivial language. And to Maggie such things had not been everyday incidents, but were a new element in her life, and found her keen appetite for homage quite fresh. That tone of gentle solicitude obliged her to look at the face that was bent towards her,

and to say, “No, thank you;” and nothing could prevent that mutual glance from being delicious to both, as it had been the evening before.

It was but an ordinary act of politeness in Stephen; it had hardly taken two minutes; and Lucy, who was singing, scarcely noticed it. But to Philip’s mind, filled already with a vague anxiety that was likely to find a definite ground for itself in any trivial incident, this sudden eagerness in Stephen, and the change in Maggie’s face, which was plainly reflecting a beam from his, seemed so strong a contrast with the previous overwrought signs of indifference, as to be charged with painful meaning. Stephen’s voice, pouring in again, jarred upon his nervous susceptibility as if it had been the clang of sheet-iron, and he felt inclined to make the piano shriek in utter discord. He had really seen no communicable ground for suspecting any unusual feeling between Stephen and Maggie: his own reason told him so, and he wanted to go home at once that he might reflect coolly on these false images, till he had convinced himself of their nullity. But then, again, he wanted to stay as long as Stephen stayed —always to be present when Stephen was present with Maggie. It seemed to poor Philip so natural, nay, inevitable, that any man who was near Maggie should fall in love with her! There was no promise of happiness for her if she were beguiled into loving Stephen Guest; and this thought emboldened Philip to view his own love for her in the light of a less unequal offering. He was beginning to play very falsely under this deafening inward tumult, and Lucy was looking at him in astonishment, when Mrs. Tulliver’s entrance to summon them to lunch came as an excuse for abruptly breaking off the music.

“Ah, Mr. Philip,” said Mr. Deane, when they entered the dining-room, “I’ve not seen you for a long while. Your father’s not at home, I think, is he? I went after him to the office the other day, and they said he was out of town.”

“He’s been to Mudport on business for several days,” said Philip; “but he’s come back now.”

“As fond of his farming hobby as ever, eh?”

“I believe so,” said Philip, rather wondering at this sudden interest in his father’s pursuits.

“Ah!” said Mr. Deane, “he’s got some land in his own hands on this side the river as well as the other, I think?”

“Yes, he has.”

“Ah!” continued Mr. Deane, as he dispensed the pigeon-pie; “he must find farming a heavy item—an expensive hobby. I never had a hobby myself—never would give in to that. And the worst of all hobbies are those that people think they can get money at. They shoot their money down like corn out of a sack then.”

Lucy felt a little nervous under her father’s apparently gratuitous criticism of Mr. Wakem’s expenditure. But it ceased there, and Mr. Deane became unusually silent and meditative during his luncheon. Lucy, accustomed to watch all indications in her father, and having reasons, which had recently become strong, for an extra interest in what referred to the Wakems, felt an unusual curiosity to know what had prompted her father’s questions. His subsequent silence made her suspect there had been some special reason for them in his mind.

With this idea in her head, she resorted to her usual plan when she wanted to tell or ask her father anything particular: she found a reason for her aunt Tulliver to leave the dining-room after dinner, and seated herself on a small stool at her father’s knee. Mr. Deane, under those circumstances, considered that he tasted some of the most agreeable moments his merits had purchased him in life, notwithstanding that Lucy, disliking to have her hair powdered with snuff, usually began by mastering his snuff-box on such occasions.

“You don’t want to go to sleep yet, papa, *do* you?” she said, as she brought up her stool and opened the large fingers that clutched the snuff-box.

“Not yet,” said Mr. Deane, glancing at the reward of merit in the decanter. “But what do *you* want?” he added, pinching the dimpled chin fondly. “To coax some more sovereigns out of my pocket for your bazaar? Eh?”

“No, I have no base motives at all to-day. I only want to talk, not to beg. I want to know what made you ask Philip Wakem about his father’s farming to-day, papa? It seemed rather odd, because you never hardly say anything to him about his father; and why should you care about Mr. Wakem’s losing money by his hobby?”

“Something to do with business,” said Mr. Deane, waving his hands, as if to repel intrusion into that mystery.

“But, papa, you always say Mr. Wakem has brought Philip up like a girl: how came you to think you should get any business knowledge out of him? Those abrupt questions sounded rather oddly. Philip thought them queer.”

“Nonsense, child!” said Mr. Deane, willing to justify his social demeanour, with which he had taken some pains in his upward progress. “There’s a report that Wakem’s mill and farm on the other side of the river—Dorlcote Mill, your uncle Tulliver’s, you know—isn’t answering so well as it did. I wanted to see if your friend Philip would let anything out about his father’s being tired of farming.”

“Why? Would you buy the mill, papa, if he would part with it?” said Lucy, eagerly. “O, tell me everything—here, you shall have your snuff-box if you’ll tell me. Because Maggie says all their hearts are set on Tom’s getting back the mill some time. It was one of the last things her father said to Tom, that he must get back the mill.”

“Hush, you little puss,” said Mr. Deane, availing himself of the restored snuff-box. “You must not say a word about this thing—do you hear? There’s very little chance of their getting the mill, or of anybody’s getting it out of Wakem’s hands. And if he knew that we wanted it with a view to the Tullivers getting it again, he’d be the less likely to part with it. It’s natural, after what happened. He behaved well enough to Tulliver before; but a horsewhipping is not likely to be paid for with sugar-plums.”

“Now, papa,” said Lucy, with a little air of solemnity, “will you trust me? You must not ask me all my reasons for what I’m going to say—but I have very strong reasons. And I’m very cautious—I am, indeed.”

“Well, let us hear.”

“Why, I believe, if you will let me take Philip Wakem into our confidence—let me tell him all about your wish to buy, and what it’s for—that my cousins wish to have it, and why they wish to have it—I believe Philip would help to bring it about. I know he would desire to do it.”

“I don’t see how that can be, child,” said Mr. Deane, looking puzzled. “Why should *he* care?”—then, with a sudden penetrating look at his daughter, “You don’t think the poor lad’s fond of you, and so you can make him do what you like?” (Mr. Deane felt quite safe about his daughter’s affections.)

“No, papa; he cares very little about me—not so much as I care about him. But I have a reason for being quite sure of what I say. Don’t you ask me. And if you ever guess, don’t tell me. Only give me leave to do as I think fit about it.”

Lucy rose from her stool to seat herself on her father’s knee, and kissed him with that last request.

“Are you sure you won’t do mischief, now?” he said, looking at her with delight.

“Yes, papa, quite sure. I’m very wise; I’ve got all your business talents. Didn’t you admire my accompt-book, now, when I showed it you?”

“Well, well, if this youngster will keep his counsel, there won’t be much harm done. And to tell the truth, I think there’s not much chance for us any other way. Now, let me go off to sleep.”

CHAPTER VIII

Wakem in a New Light

Before three days had passed after the conversation you have just overheard between Lucy and her father, she had contrived to have a private interview with Philip during a visit of Maggie's to her aunt Glegg. For a day and a night Philip turned over in his mind with restless agitation all that Lucy had told him in that interview, till he had thoroughly resolved on a course of action. He thought he saw before him now a possibility of altering his position with respect to Maggie, and removing at least one obstacle between them. He laid his plan and calculated all his moves with the fervid deliberation of a chess-player in the days of his first ardour, and was amazed himself at his sudden genius as a tactician. His plan was as bold as it was thoroughly calculated. Having watched for a moment when his father had nothing more urgent on his hands than the newspaper, he went behind him, laid a hand on his shoulder, and said—

"Father, will you come into my sanctum, and look at my new sketches? I've arranged them now."

"I'm getting terribly stiff in the joints, Phil, for climbing those stairs of yours," said Wakem, looking kindly at his son as he laid down his paper. "But come along, then."

"This is a nice place for you, isn't it, Phil?—a capital light that from the roof, eh?" was, as usual, the first thing he said on entering the painting-room. He liked to remind himself and his son too that his fatherly indulgence had provided the accommodation. He had been a good father. Emily would have nothing to reproach him with there, if she came back again from her grave.

"Come, come," he said, putting his double eye-glass over his nose, and seating himself to take a general view while he rested, "you've got a famous show here. Upon my word, I don't see that your things

aren't as good as that London artist's—what's his name—that Leyburn gave so much money for."

Philip shook his head and smiled. He had seated himself on his painting-stool, and had taken a lead pencil in his hand, with which he was making strong marks to counteract the sense of tremulousness. He watched his father get up, and walk slowly round, good-naturedly dwelling on the pictures much longer than his amount of genuine taste for landscape would have prompted, till he stopped before a stand on which two pictures were placed—one much larger than the other—the smaller one in a leather case.

"Bless me! what have you here?" said Wakem, startled by a sudden transition from landscape to portrait. "I thought you'd left off figures. Who are these?"

"They are the same person," said Philip, with calm promptness, "at different ages."

"And what person?" said Wakem, sharply fixing his eyes with a growing look of suspicion on the larger picture.

"Miss Tulliver. The small one is something like what she was when I was at school with her brother at King's Lorton: the larger one is not quite so good a likeness of what she was when I came from abroad."

Wakem turned round fiercely, with a flushed face, letting his eye-glass fall, and looking at his son with a savage expression for a moment, as if he was ready to strike that daring feebleness from the stool. But he threw himself into the arm-chair again, and thrust his hands into his trouser-pockets, still looking angrily at his son, however. Philip did not return the look, but sat quietly watching the point of his pencil.

"And do you mean to say, then, that you have had any acquaintance with her since you came from abroad?" said Wakem, at last, with that vain effort which rage always makes to throw as much punishment as it desires to inflict into words and tones, since blows are forbidden.

“Yes: I saw a great deal of her for a whole year before her father’s death. We met often in that thicket—the Red Deeps—near Dorlcote Mill. I love her dearly: I shall never love any other woman. I have thought of her ever since she was a little girl.”

“Go on, sir!—and you have corresponded with her all this while?”

“No. I never told her I loved her till just before we parted, and she promised her brother not to see me again or to correspond with me. I am not sure that she loves me, or would consent to marry me. But if she would consent—if she *did* love me well enough—I should marry her.”

“And this is the return you make me for all the indulgences I’ve heaped on you?” said Wakem, getting white, and beginning to tremble under an enraged sense of impotence before Philip’s calm defiance and concentration of purpose.

“No, father,” said Philip, looking up at him for the first time. “I don’t regard it as a return. You have been an indulgent father to me; but I have always felt that it was because you had an affectionate wish to give me as much happiness as my unfortunate lot would admit of—not that it was a debt you expected me to pay by sacrificing all my chances of happiness to satisfy feelings of yours, which I can never share.”

“I think most sons would share their father’s feelings in this case,” said Wakem, bitterly. “The girl’s father was an ignorant mad brute, who was within an inch of murdering me. The whole town knows it. And the brother is just as insolent, only in a cooler way. He forbade her seeing you, you say; he’ll break every bone in your body, for your greater happiness, if you don’t take care. But you seem to have made up your mind: you have counted the consequences, I suppose. Of course you are independent of me: you can marry this girl tomorrow, if you like: you are a man of five-and-twenty—you can go your way, and I can go mine. We need have no more to do with each other.”

Wakem rose and walked towards the door, but something held him back, and instead of leaving the room, he walked up and down

it. Philip was slow to reply, and when he spoke, his tone had a more incisive quietness and clearness than ever.

"No: I can't marry Miss Tulliver, even if she would have me—if I have only my own resources to maintain her with. I have been brought up to no profession. I can't offer her poverty as well as deformity."

"Ah, *there* is a reason for your clinging to me, doubtless," said Wakem, still bitterly, though Philip's last words had given him a pang: they had stirred a feeling which had been a habit for a quarter of a century. He threw himself into the chair again.

"I expected all this," said Philip. "I know these scenes are often happening between father and son. If I were like other men of my age, I might answer your angry words by still angrier—we might part—I should marry the woman I love, and have a chance of being as happy as the rest. But if it will be a satisfaction to you to annihilate the very object of everything you've done for me, you have an advantage over most fathers: you can completely deprive me of the only thing that would make my life worth having."

Philip paused, but his father was silent.

"You know best what satisfaction you would have, beyond that of gratifying a ridiculous rancour worthy only of wandering savages."

"Ridiculous rancour!" Wakem burst out. "What do you mean? Damn it! is a man to be horsewhipped by a boor and love him for it? Besides, there's that cold, proud devil of a son, who said a word to me I shall not forget when we had the settling. He would be as pleasant a mark for a bullet as I know—if he were worth the expense."

"I don't mean your resentment towards them," said Philip, who had his reasons for some sympathy with this view of Tom, "though a feeling of revenge is not worth much, that you should care to keep it. I mean your extending the enmity to a helpless girl, who has too much sense and goodness to share their narrow prejudices. *She* has never entered into the family quarrels."

“What does that signify? We don’t ask what a woman does—we ask whom she belongs to. It’s altogether a degrading thing to you—to think of marrying old Tulliver’s daughter.”

For the first time in the dialogue, Philip lost some of his self-control, and coloured with anger.

“Miss Tulliver,” he said, with bitter incisiveness, “has the only grounds of rank that anything but vulgar folly can suppose to belong to the middle class: she is thoroughly refined, and her friends, whatever else they may be, are respected for irreproachable honour and integrity. All St. Ogg’s, I fancy, would pronounce her to be more than my equal.”

Wakem darted a glance of fierce question at his son; but Philip was not looking at him, and with a certain penitent consciousness went on, in a few moments, as if in amplification of his last words—

“Find a single person in St. Ogg’s who will not tell you that a beautiful creature like her would be throwing herself away on a pitiable object like me.”

“Not she!” said Wakem, rising again, and forgetting everything else in a burst of resentful pride, half fatherly, half personal. “It would be a deuced fine match for her. It’s all stuff about an accidental deformity, when a girl’s really attached to a man.”

“But girls are not apt to get attached under those circumstances,” said Philip.

“Well, then,” said Wakem, rather brutally, trying to recover his previous position, “if she doesn’t care for you, you might have spared yourself the trouble of talking to me about her—and you might have spared me the trouble of refusing my consent to what was never likely to happen.”

Wakem strode to the door, and, without looking round again, banged it after him.

Philip was not without confidence that his father would be ultimately wrought upon as he had expected, by what had passed; but the scene had jarred upon his nerves, which were as sensitive as

a woman's. He determined not to go down to dinner: he couldn't meet his father again that day. It was Wakem's habit, when he had no company at home, to go out in the evening—often as early as half-past seven; and as it was far on in the afternoon now, Philip locked up his room and went out for a long ramble, thinking he would not return until his father was out of the house again. He got into a boat, and went down the river to a favourite village, where he dined, and lingered till it was late enough for him to return. He had never had any sort of quarrel with his father before, and had a sickening fear that this contest, just begun, might go on for weeks—and what might not happen in that time? He would not allow himself to define what that involuntary question meant. But if he could once be in the position of Maggie's accepted, acknowledged lover, there would be less room for vague dread. He went up to his painting-room again, and threw himself, with a sense of fatigue, into the arm-chair, looking round absently at the views of water and rock that were ranged around, till he fell into a doze, in which he fancied Maggie was slipping down a glistening, green, slimy channel of a waterfall, and he was looking on helpless, till he was awakened by what seemed a sudden, awful crash.

It was the opening of the door, and he could hardly have dozed more than a few moments, for there was no perceptible change in the evening light. It was his father who entered; and when Philip moved to vacate the chair for him, he said—

"Sit still. I'd rather walk about."

He stalked up and down the room once or twice, and then, standing opposite Philip with his hand thrust in his side-pockets, he said, as if continuing a conversation that had not been broken off—

"But this girl seems to have been fond of you, Phil, else she wouldn't have met you in that way."

Philip's heart was beating rapidly, and a transient flush passed over his face like a gleam. It was not quite easy to speak at once.

"She liked me at King's Lorton, when she was a little girl, because I used to sit with her brother a great deal when he had hurt his foot.

She had kept that in her memory, and thought of me as a friend of a long while ago. She didn't think of me as a lover, when she met me."

"Well, but you made love to her at last. What did she say then?" said Wakem, walking about again.

"She said she *did* love me then."

"Confound it, then, what else do you want? Is she a jilt?"

"She was very young then," said Philip, hesitatingly. "I'm afraid she hardly knew what she felt. I'm afraid our long separation, and the idea that events must always divide us, may have made a difference."

"But she's in the town. I've seen her at church. Haven't you spoken to her since you came back?"

"Yes, at Mr. Deane's. But I couldn't renew my proposals to her on several grounds. One obstacle would be removed if you would give your consent—if you would be willing to think of her as a daughter-in-law."

Wakem was silent a little while, pausing before Maggie's picture.

"She's not the sort of woman your mother was, though, Phil," he said, at last. "I saw her at church—she's handsomer than this—deuced fine eyes and fine figure, I saw; but rather dangerous and unmanageable, eh?"

"She's very tender and affectionate; and so simple—without the airs and petty contrivances other women have."

"Ah?" said Wakem. Then looking round at his son, "But your mother looked gentler: she had that brown wavy hair and grey eyes, like yours. You can't remember her very well. It was a thousand pities I'd no likeness of her."

"Then, shouldn't you be glad for me to have the same sort of happiness, father—to sweeten my life for me? There can never be another tie so strong to you as that which began eight-and-twenty years ago, when you married my mother, and you have been tightening it ever since."

“Ah, Phil—you’re the only fellow that knows the best of me,” said Wakem, giving his hand to his son. “We must keep together if we can. And now, what am I to do? You must come down-stairs and tell me. Am I to go and call on this dark-eyed damsel?”

The barrier once thrown down in this way, Philip could talk freely to his father of their entire relation with the Tullivers—of the desire to get the mill and land back into the family—and of its transfer to Guest & Co. as an intermediate step. He could venture now to be persuasive and urgent, and his father yielded with more readiness than he had calculated on.

“*I* don’t care about the mill,” he said at last, with a sort of angry compliance. “I’ve had an infernal deal of bother lately about the mill. Let them pay me for my improvements, that’s all. But there’s one thing you needn’t ask me. I shall have no direct transactions with young Tulliver. If you like to swallow him, for his sister’s sake, you may; but I’ve no sauce that will make him go down.”

I leave you to imagine the agreeable feelings with which Philip went to Mr. Deane the next day, to say that Mr. Wakem was ready to open the negotiations, and Lucy’s pretty triumph as she appealed to her father whether she had not proved her great business abilities. Mr. Deane was rather puzzled, and suspected that there had been something “going on” among the young people to which he wanted a clue. But to men of Mr. Deane’s stamp, what goes on among the young people is as extraneous to the real business of life as what goes on among the birds and butterflies—until it can be shown to have a malign bearing on monetary affairs. And in this case the bearing appeared to be entirely propitious.

CHAPTER IX

Charity in Full-dress

The culmination of Maggie's career as an admired member of society in St. Ogg's was certainly the day of the bazaar, when her simple, noble beauty, clad in a white muslin of some soft-floating kind, which I suspect must have come from the stores of aunt Pullet's wardrobe, appeared with marked distinction among the more adorned and conventional women around her. We perhaps never detect how much of our social demeanour is made up of artificial airs, until we see a person who is at once beautiful and simple: without the beauty, we are apt to call simplicity awkwardness. The Miss Guests were much too well-bred to have any of the grimaces and affected tones that belong to pretentious vulgarity; but their stall being next to the one where Maggie sat, it seemed newly obvious to-day that Miss Guest held her chin too high, and that Miss Laura spoke and moved continually with a view to effect.

All well-drest St. Ogg's and its neighbourhood were there; and it would have been worth while to come, even from a distance, to see the fine old hall, with its open roof and carved oaken rafters, and great oaken folding-doors, and light shed down from a height on the many-coloured show beneath: a very quaint place, with broad faded stripes painted on the walls, and here and there a show of heraldic animals of a bristly, long-snouted character, the cherished emblems of a noble family once the seigniors of this now civic hall. A grand arch, cut in the upper wall at one end, surmounted an oaken orchestra, with an open room behind it, where hothouse plants and stalls for refreshments were disposed: an agreeable resort for gentlemen, disposed to loiter, and yet to exchange the occasional crush down below for a more commodious point of view. In fact, the perfect fitness of this ancient building for an admirable modern

purpose, that made charity truly elegant, and led through vanity up to the supply of a deficit, was so striking that hardly a person entered the room without exchanging the remark more than once. Near the great arch over the orchestra was the stone oriel with painted glass, which was one of the venerable inconsistencies of the old hall; and it was close by this that Lucy had her stall, for the convenience of certain large plain articles which she had taken charge of for Mrs. Kenn. Maggie had begged to sit at the open end of the stall, and to have the sale of these articles rather than of bead-mats and other elaborate products, of which she had but a dim understanding. But it soon appeared that the gentlemen's dressing-gowns, which were among her commodities, were objects of such general attention and inquiry, and excited so troublesome a curiosity as to their lining and comparative merits, together with a determination to test them by trying on, as to make her post a very conspicuous one. The ladies who had commodities of their own to sell, and did not want dressing-gowns, saw at once the frivolity and bad taste of this masculine preference for goods which any tailor could furnish; and it is possible that the emphatic notice of various kinds which was drawn towards Miss Tulliver on this public occasion, threw a very strong and unmistakeable light on her subsequent conduct in many minds then present. Not that anger, on account of spurned beauty, can dwell in the celestial breasts of charitable ladies, but rather, that the errors of persons who have once been much admired necessarily take a deeper tinge from the mere force of contrast; and also, that to-day Maggie's conspicuous position, for the first time, made evident certain characteristics which were subsequently felt to have an explanatory bearing. There was something rather bold in Miss Tulliver's direct gaze, and something undefinably coarse in the style of her beauty, which placed her, in the opinion of all feminine judges, far below her cousin Miss Deane; for the ladies of St. Ogg's had now completely ceded to Lucy their hypothetic claims on the admiration of Mr. Stephen Guest.

As for dear little Lucy herself, her late benevolent triumph about the Mill, and all the affectionate projects she was cherishing for Maggie and Philip, helped to give her the highest spirits to-day, and she felt nothing but pleasure in the evidence of Maggie's attractiveness. It is true, she was looking very charming herself, and Stephen was paying her the utmost attention on this public occasion; jealously buying up the articles he had seen under her fingers in the process of making, and gaily helping her to cajole the male customers into the purchase of the most effeminate futilities. He chose to lay aside his hat and wear a scarlet fez of her embroidering; but by superficial observers this was necessarily liable to be interpreted less as a compliment to Lucy than as a mark of coxcombry. "Guest is a great coxcomb," young Torry observed; "but then he is a privileged person in St. Ogg's—he carries all before him: if another fellow did such things, everybody would say he made a fool of himself."

And Stephen purchased absolutely nothing from Maggie, until Lucy said, in rather a vexed under-tone—

"See, now; all the things of Maggie's knitting will be gone, and you will not have bought one. There are those deliciously soft warm things for the wrists—do buy them."

"Oh, no," said Stephen, "they must be intended for imaginative persons, who can chill themselves on this warm day by thinking of the frosty Caucasus. Stern reason is my forte, you know. You must get Philip to buy those. By the way, why doesn't he come?"

"He never likes going where there are many people, though I enjoined him to come. He said he would buy up any of my goods that the rest of the world rejected. But now, do go and buy something of Maggie."

"No, no—see—she has got a customer: there is old Wakem himself just coming up."

Lucy's eyes turned with anxious interest towards Maggie, to see how she went through this first interview, since a sadly memorable time, with a man towards whom she must have so strange a mixture

of feelings; but she was pleased to notice that Wakem had tact enough to enter at once into talk about the bazaar wares, and appear interested in purchasing, smiling now and then kindly at Maggie, and not calling on her to speak much, as if he observed that she was rather pale and tremulous.

“Why, Wakem is making himself particularly amiable to your cousin,” said Stephen, in an under-tone to Lucy; “is it pure magnanimity? you talked of a family quarrel.”

“O, that will soon be quite healed, I hope,” said Lucy, becoming a little indiscreet in her satisfaction, and speaking with an air of significance. But Stephen did not appear to notice this, and as some lady-purchasers came up, he lounged on towards Maggie’s end, handling trifles and standing aloof until Wakem, who had taken out his purse, had finished his transactions.

“My son came with me,” he overheard Wakem saying, “but he has vanished into some other part of the building, and has left all these charitable gallantries to me. I hope you’ll reproach him for his shabby conduct.”

She returned his smile and bow without speaking, and he turned away, only then observing Stephen, and nodding to him. Maggie, conscious that Stephen was still there, busied herself with counting money, and avoided looking up. She had been well pleased that he had devoted himself to Lucy to-day, and had not come near her. They had begun the morning with an indifferent salutation, and both had rejoiced in being aloof from each other, like a patient who has actually done without his opium, in spite of former failures in resolution. And during the last few days they had even been making up their minds to failures, looking to the outward events that must soon come to separate them, as a reason for dispensing with self-conquest in detail.

Stephen moved step by step as if he were being unwillingly dragged, until he had got round the open end of the stall, and was half hidden by a screen of draperies. Maggie went on counting her money till she suddenly heard a deep gentle voice saying, “Aren’t

you very tired? Do let me bring you something—some fruit or jelly —mayn't I?"

The unexpected tones shook her like a sudden accidental vibration of a harp close by her.

"O no, thank you," she said, faintly, and only half-looking up for an instant.

"You look so pale," Stephen insisted, in a more entreating tone. "I'm sure you're exhausted. I must disobey you, and bring something."

"No, indeed, I couldn't take it."

"Are you angry with me? What have I done? *Do* look at me."

"Pray, go away," said Maggie, looking at him helplessly, her eyes glancing immediately from him to the opposite corner of the orchestra, which was half hidden by the folds of the old faded green curtain. Maggie had no sooner uttered this entreaty than she was wretched at the admission it implied; but Stephen turned away at once, and, following her upward glance, he saw Philip Wakem seated in the half-hidden corner, so that he could command little more than that angle of the hall in which Maggie sat. An entirely new thought occurred to Stephen, and, linking itself with what he had observed of Wakem's manner, and with Lucy's reply to his observation, it convinced him that there had been some former relation between Philip and Maggie beyond that childish one of which he had heard. More than one impulse made him immediately leave the hall and go up-stairs to the refreshment-room, where, walking up to Philip, he sat down behind him, and put his hand on his shoulder.

"Are you studying for a portrait, Phil," he said, "or for a sketch of that oriel window? By George! it makes a capital bit from this dark corner, with the curtain just marking it off."

"I have been studying expression," said Philip, curtly.

"What! Miss Tulliver's? It's rather of the savage-moody order today, I think—something of the fallen princess serving behind a

counter. Her cousin sent me to her with a civil offer to get her some refreshment, but I have been snubbed, as usual. There's a natural antipathy between us, I suppose: I have seldom the honour to please her."

"What a hypocrite you are!" said Philip, flushing angrily.

"What! because experience must have told me that I'm universally pleasing? I admit the law, but there's some disturbing force here."

"I am going," said Philip, rising abruptly.

"So am I—to get a breath of fresh air; this place gets oppressive. I think I have done suit and service long enough."

The two friends walked down-stairs together without speaking. Philip turned through the outer door into the courtyard, but Stephen, saying, "O, by the by, I must call in here," went on along the passage to one of the rooms at the other end of the building, which were appropriated to the town library. He had the room all to himself, and a man requires nothing less than this, when he wants to dash his cap on the table, throw himself astride a chair, and stare at a high brick wall with a frown which would not have been beneath the occasion if he had been slaying "the giant Python." The conduct that issues from a moral conflict has often so close a resemblance to vice, that the distinction escapes all outward judgments, founded on a mere comparison of actions. It is clear to you, I hope, that Stephen was not a hypocrite—capable of deliberate doubleness for a selfish end; and yet his fluctuations between the indulgence of a feeling and the systematic concealment of it, might have made a good case in support of Philip's accusation.

Meanwhile, Maggie sat at her stall cold and trembling, with that painful sensation in the eyes which comes from resolutely repressed tears. Was her life to be always like this?—always bringing some new source of inward strife? She heard confusedly the busy indifferent voices around her, and wished her mind could flow into that easy, babbling current. It was at this moment that Dr. Kenn, who had quite lately come into the hall, and was now walking down the middle with his hands behind him, taking a general view, fixed

his eyes on Maggie for the first time, and was struck with the expression of pain on her beautiful face. She was sitting quite still, for the stream of customers had lessened at this late hour in the afternoon: the gentlemen had chiefly chosen the middle of the day, and Maggie's stall was looking rather bare. This, with her absent, pained expression, finished the contrast between her and her companions, who were all bright, eager, and busy. He was strongly arrested. Her face had naturally drawn his attention as a new and striking one at church, and he had been introduced to her during a short call on business at Mr. Deane's, but he had never spoken more than three words to her. He walked towards her now, and Maggie, perceiving some one approaching, roused herself to look up and be prepared to speak. She felt a childlike, instinctive relief from the sense of uneasiness in this exertion, when she saw it was Dr. Kenn's face that was looking at her: that plain, middle-aged face, with a grave, penetrating kindness in it, seeming to tell of a human being who had reached a firm, safe strand, but was looking with helpful pity towards the strugglers still tossed by the waves, had an effect on Maggie at this moment which was afterwards remembered by her as if it had been a promise. The middle-aged, who have lived through their strongest emotions, but are yet in the time when memory is still half passionate and not merely contemplative, should surely be a sort of natural priesthood, whom life has disciplined and consecrated to be the refuge and rescue of early stumblers and victims of self-despair. Most of us, at some moment in our young lives, would have welcomed a priest of that natural order in any sort of canonicals or uncanonicals, but had to scramble upwards into all the difficulties of nineteen entirely without such aid, as Maggie did.

"You find your office rather a fatiguing one, I fear, Miss Tulliver?" said Dr. Kenn.

"It is, rather," said Maggie, simply, not being accustomed to simper amiable denials of obvious facts.

"But I can tell Mrs. Kenn that you have disposed of her goods very quickly," he added; "she will be very much obliged to you."

“O, I have done nothing: the gentlemen came very fast to buy the dressing-gowns and embroidered waistcoats, but I think any of the other ladies would have sold more: I didn’t know what to say about them.”

Dr. Kenn smiled. “I hope I’m going to have you as a permanent parishioner now, Miss Tulliver—am I? You have been at a distance from us hitherto.”

“I have been a teacher in a school, and I’m going into another situation of the same kind very soon.”

“Ah? I was hoping you would remain among your friends, who are all in this neighbourhood, I believe.”

“O, *I must go,”* said Maggie, earnestly, looking at Dr. Kenn with an expression of reliance, as if she had told him her history in those three words. It was one of those moments of implicit revelation which will sometimes happen even between people who meet quite transiently—on a mile’s journey, perhaps, or when resting by the wayside. There is always this possibility of a word or look from a stranger to keep alive the sense of human brotherhood.

Dr. Kenn’s ear and eye took in all the signs that this brief confidence of Maggie’s was charged with meaning.

“I understand,” he said; “you feel it right to go. But that will not prevent our meeting again, I hope: it will not prevent my knowing you better, if I can be of any service to you.”

He put out his hand and pressed hers kindly before he turned away.

“She has some trouble or other at heart,” he thought. “Poor child! she looks as if she might turn out to be one of

> ‘The souls by nature pitched too high,
> By suffering plunged too low.’

There’s something wonderfully honest in those beautiful eyes.”

It may be surprising that Maggie, among whose many imperfections an excessive delight in admiration and acknowledged

supremacy were not absent now, any more than when she was instructing the gypsies with a view towards achieving a royal position among them, was not more elated on a day when she had had the tribute of so many looks and smiles, together with that satisfactory consciousness which had necessarily come from being taken before Lucy's cheval-glass, and made to look at the full length of her tall beauty, crowned by the night of her massy hair. Maggie had smiled at herself then, and for the moment had forgotten everything in the sense of her own beauty. If that state of mind could have lasted, her choice would have been to have Stephen Guest at her feet, offering her a life filled with all luxuries, with daily incense of adoration near and distant, and with all possibilities of culture at her command. But there were things in her stronger than vanity—passion, and affection, and long deep memories of early discipline and effort, of early claims on her love and pity; and the stream of vanity was soon swept along and mingled inperceptibly with that wider current which was at its highest force to-day, under the double urgency of the events and inward impulses brought by the last week.

Philip had not spoken to her himself about the removal of obstacles between them on his father's side—he shrank from that; but he had told everything to Lucy, with the hope that Maggie, being informed through her, might give him some encouraging sign that their being brought thus much nearer to each other was a happiness to her. The rush of conflicting feelings was too great for Maggie to say much when Lucy, with a face breathing playful joy, like one of Correggio's cherubs, poured forth her triumphant revelation; and Lucy could hardly be surprised that she could do little more than cry with gladness at the thought of her father's wish being fulfilled, and of Tom's getting the Mill again in reward for all his hard striving. The details of preparation for the bazaar had then come to usurp Lucy's attention for the next few days, and nothing had been said by the cousins on subjects that were likely to rouse deeper feelings. Philip had been to the house more than once, but

Maggie had had no private conversation with him, and thus she had been left to fight her inward battle without interference.

But when the bazaar was fairly ended, and the cousins were alone again, resting together at home, Lucy said—

"You must give up going to stay with your aunt Moss the day after to-morrow, Maggie: write a note to her, and tell her you have put it off at my request, and I'll send the man with it. She won't be displeased; you'll have plenty of time to go by-and-by; and I don't want you to go out of the way just now."

"Yes, indeed I must go, dear; I can't put it off. I wouldn't leave aunt Gritty out for the world. And I shall have very little time, for I'm going away to a new situation on the 25th of June."

"Maggie!" said Lucy, almost white with astonishment.

"I didn't tell you, dear," said Maggie, making a great effort to command herself, "because you've been so busy. But some time ago I wrote to our old governess, Miss Firniss, to ask her to let me know if she met with any situation that I could fill, and the other day I had a letter from her telling me that I could take three orphan pupils of hers to the coast during the holidays, and then make trial of a situation with her as teacher. I wrote yesterday to accept the offer."

Lucy felt so hurt that for some moments she was unable to speak.

"Maggie," she said at last, "how could you be so unkind to me not to tell me—to take *such* a step—and now!" She hesitated a little, and then added—"And Philip? I thought everything was going to be so happy. O Maggie—what is the reason? Give it up; let me write. There is nothing now to keep you and Philip apart."

"Yes," said Maggie, faintly. "There is Tom's feeling. He said I must give him up if I married Philip. And I know he would not change—at least not for a long while—unless something happened to soften him."

"But I will talk to him: he's coming back this week. And this good news about the Mill will soften him. And I'll talk to him about

Philip. Tom's always very compliant to me: I don't think he's so obstinate."

"But I must go," said Maggie, in a distressed voice. "I must leave some time to pass. Don't press me to stay, dear Lucy."

Lucy was silent for two or three minutes, looking away and ruminating. At length she knelt down by her cousin, and, looking up in her face with anxious seriousness, said—

"Maggie, is it that you don't love Philip well enough to marry him?—tell me—trust me."

Maggie held Lucy's hands tightly in silence a little while. Her own hands were quite cold. But when she spoke, her voice was quite clear and distinct.

"Yes, Lucy, I would choose to marry him. I think it would be the best and highest lot for me—to make his life happy. He loved me first. No one else could be quite what he is to me. But I can't divide myself from my brother for life. I must go away, and wait. Pray, don't speak to me again about it."

Lucy obeyed in pain and wonder. The next word she said was—

"Well, dear Maggie, at least you will go to the dance at Park House to-morrow, and have some music and brightness, before you go to pay these dull, dutiful visits. Ah! here come aunty and the tea."

CHAPTER X

The Spell Seems Broken

The suite of rooms opening into each other at Park House looked duly brilliant with lights and flowers and the personal splendours of sixteen couples, with attendant parents and guardians. The focus of brilliancy was the long drawing-room, where the dancing went forward, under the inspiration of the grand piano; the library, into which it opened at one end, had the more sober illumination of maturity, with caps and cards; and at the other end, the pretty sitting-room with a conservatory attached, was left as an occasional cool retreat. Lucy, who had laid aside her black for the first time, and had her pretty slimness set off by an abundant dress of white crape, was the acknowledged queen of the occasion; for this was one of the Miss Guests' thoroughly condescending parties, including no member of any aristocracy higher than that of St. Ogg's, and stretching to the extreme limits of commercial and professional gentility.

Maggie at first refused to dance, saying that she had forgotten all the figures—it was so many years since she had danced at school; and she was glad to have that excuse, for it is ill dancing with a heavy heart. But at length the music wrought in her young limbs, and the longing came; even though it was the horrible young Torry, who walked up a second time to try and persuade her. She warned him that she could not dance anything but a country-dance; but he, of course, was willing to wait for that high felicity, meaning only to be complimentary when he assured her at several intervals that it was a "great bore" that she couldn't waltz—he would have liked so much to waltz with her. But at last it was the turn of the good old-fashioned dance which has the least of vanity and the most of merriment in it, and Maggie quite forgot her troublous life in a childlike enjoyment of that half-rustic rhythm which seems to

banish pretentious etiquette. She felt quite charitably towards young Torry, as his hand bore her along and held her up in the dance; her eyes and cheeks had that fire of young joy in them which will flame out if it can find the least breath to fan it; and her simple black dress, with its bit of black lace, seemed like the dim setting of a jewel.

Stephen had not yet asked her to dance—had not yet paid her more than a passing civility. Since yesterday, that inward vision of her which perpetually made part of his consciousness, had been half-screened by the image of Philip Wakem, which came across it like a blot: there was some attachment between her and Philip; at least there was an attachment on his side, which made her feel in some bondage. Here then, Stephen told himself, was another claim of honour which called on him to resist the attraction that was continually threatening to overpower him. He told himself so; and yet he had once or twice felt a certain savage resistance, and at another moment a shuddering repugnance, to this intrusion of Philip's image, which almost made it a new incitement to rush towards Maggie and claim her for himself. Nevertheless he had done what he meant to do this evening: he had kept aloof from her; he had hardly looked at her; and he had been gaily assiduous to Lucy. But now his eyes were devouring Maggie: he felt inclined to kick young Torry out of the dance, and take his place. Then he wanted the dance to end that he might get rid of his partner. The possibility that he too should dance with Maggie, and have her hand in his so long, was beginning to possess him like a thirst. But even now their hands were meeting in the dance—were meeting still to the very end of it, though they were far off each other.

Stephen hardly knew what happened, or in what automatic way he got through the duties of politeness in the interval, until he was free and saw Maggie seated alone again, at the farther end of the room. He made his way towards her round the couples that were forming for the waltz, and when Maggie became conscious that she was the person he sought, she felt, in spite of all the thoughts that had gone before, a glowing gladness at heart. Her eyes and cheeks

were still brightened with her childlike enthusiasm in the dance; her whole frame was set to joy and tenderness; even the coming pain could not seem bitter—she was ready to welcome it as a part of life, for life at this moment seemed a keen vibrating consciousness poised above pleasure or pain. This one, this last night, she might expand unrestrainedly in the warmth of the present, without those chill eating thoughts of the past and the future.

"They're going to waltz again," said Stephen, bending to speak to her, with that glance and tone of subdued tenderness which young dreams create to themselves in the summer woods when low cooing voices fill the air. Such glances and tones bring the breath of poetry with them into a room that is half-stifling with glaring gas and hard flirtation.

"They are going to waltz again: it is rather dizzy work to look on, and the room is very warm. Shall we walk about a little?"

He took her hand and placed it within his arm, and they walked on into the sitting-room, where the tables were strewn with engravings for the accommodation of visitors who would not want to look at them. But no visitors were here at this moment. They passed on into the conservatory.

"How strange and unreal the trees and flowers look with the lights among them," said Maggie, in a low voice. "They look as if they belonged to an enchanted land, and would never fade away:—I could fancy they were all made of jewels."

She was looking at the tier of geraniums as she spoke, and Stephen made no answer: but he was looking at her—and does not a supreme poet blend light and sound into one, calling darkness mute, and light eloquent? Something strangely powerful there was in the light of Stephen's long gaze, for it made Maggie's face turn towards it and look upward at it—slowly, like a flower at the ascending brightness. And they walked unsteadily on, without feeling that they were walking—without feeling anything but that long grave mutual gaze which has the solemnity belonging to all deep human passion. The hovering thought that they must and would renounce each

other made this moment of mute confession more intense in its rapture.

But they had reached the end of the conservatory, and were obliged to pause and turn. The change of movement brought a new consciousness to Maggie: she blushed deeply, turned away her head, and drew her arm from Stephen's, going up to some flowers to smell them. Stephen stood motionless, and still pale.

"O, may I get this rose?" said Maggie, making a great effort to say something, and dissipate the burning sense of irretrievable confession. "I think I am quite wicked with roses—I like to gather them and smell them till they have no scent left."

Stephen was mute; he was incapable of putting a sentence together, and Maggie bent her arm a little upward towards the large half-opened rose that had attracted her. Who has not felt the beauty of a woman's arm?—the unspeakable suggestions of tenderness that lie in the dimpled elbow, and all the varied gently-lessening curves down to the delicate wrist, with its tiniest, almost imperceptible nicks in the firm softness. A woman's arm touched the soul of a great sculptor two thousand years ago, so that he wrought an image of it for the Parthenon which moves us still as it clasps lovingly the time-worn marble of a headless trunk. Maggie's was such an arm as that—and it had the warm tints of life.

A mad impulse seized on Stephen; he darted towards the arm, and showered kisses on it, clasping the wrist.

But the next moment Maggie snatched it from him, and glared at him like a wounded war-goddess, quivering with rage and humiliation.

"How dare you?"—she spoke in a deeply-shaken, half-smothered voice. "What right have I given you to insult me?"

She darted from him into the adjoining room, and threw herself on the sofa, panting and trembling.

A horrible punishment was come upon her for the sin of allowing a moment's happiness that was treachery to Lucy, to Philip—to her own better soul. That momentary happiness had been smitten with a

blight—a leprosy: Stephen thought more lightly of *her* than he did of Lucy.

As for Stephen, he leaned back against the framework of the conservatory, dizzy with the conflict of passions—love, rage, and confused despair: despair at his want of self-mastery, and despair that he had offended Maggie.

The last feeling surmounted every other: to be by her side again and entreat forgiveness was the only thing that had the force of a motive for him, and she had not been seated more than a few minutes when he came and stood humbly before her. But Maggie's bitter rage was unspent.

"Leave me to myself, if you please," she said, with impetuous haughtiness, "and for the future avoid me."

Stephen turned away, and walked backwards and forwards at the other end of the room. There was the dire necessity of going back into the dancing-room again, and he was beginning to be conscious of that. They had been absent so short a time, that when he went in again the waltz was not ended.

Maggie, too, was not long before she re-entered. All the pride of her nature was stung into activity: the hateful weakness which had dragged her within reach of this wound to her self-respect, had at least wrought its own cure. The thoughts and temptations of the last month should all be flung away into an unvisited chamber of memory: there was nothing to allure her now; duty would be easy, and all the old calm purposes would reign peacefully once more. She re-entered the drawing-room still with some excited brightness in her face, but with a sense of proud self-command that defied anything to agitate her. She refused to dance again, but she talked quite readily and calmly with every one who addressed her. And when they got home that night, she kissed Lucy with a free heart, almost exulting in this scorching moment, which had delivered her from the possibility of another word or look that would have the stamp of treachery towards that gentle, unsuspicious sister.

The next morning Maggie did not set off to Basset quite so soon as she had expected. Her mother was to accompany her in the carriage, and household business could not be despatched hastily by Mrs. Tulliver. So Maggie, who had been in a hurry to prepare herself, had to sit waiting, equipped for the drive, in the garden. Lucy was busy in the house wrapping up some bazaar presents for the younger ones at Basset, and when there was a loud ring at the doorbell, Maggie felt some alarm lest Lucy should bring out Stephen to her: it was sure to be Stephen.

But presently the visitor came out into the garden alone, and seated himself by her on the garden-chair. It was not Stephen.

“We can just catch the tips of the Scotch firs, Maggie, from this seat,” said Philip.

They had taken each other’s hands in silence, but Maggie had looked at him with a more complete revival of the old childlike affectionate smile than he had seen before, and he felt encouraged.

“Yes,” she said, “I often look at them, and wish I could see the low sunlight on the stems again. But I have never been that way but once—to the churchyard, with my mother.”

“I have been there—I go there—continually,” said Philip. “I have nothing but the past to live upon.”

A keen remembrance and keen pity impelled Maggie to put her hand in Philip’s. They had so often walked hand-in-hand!

“I remember all the spots,” she said—“just where you told me of particular things—beautiful stories that I had never heard of before.”

“You will go there again soon—won’t you, Maggie?” said Philip, getting timid. “The Mill will soon be your brother’s home again.”

“Yes; but I shall not be there,” said Maggie. “I shall only hear of that happiness. I am going away again—Lucy has not told you, perhaps?”

“Then the future will never join on to the past again, Maggie? That book is quite closed?”

The grey eyes that had so often looked up at her with entreating worship, looked up at her now, with a last struggling ray of hope in them, and Maggie met them with her large sincere gaze.

“That book never will be closed, Philip,” she said, with grave sadness; “I desire no future that will break the ties of the past. But the tie to my brother is one of the strongest. I can do nothing willingly that will divide me always from him.”

“Is that the only reason that would keep us apart for ever, Maggie?” said Philip, with a desperate determination to have a definite answer.

“The only reason,” said Maggie, with calm decision. And she believed it. At that moment she felt as if the enchanted cup had been dashed to the ground. The reactionary excitement that gave her a proud self-mastery had not subsided, and she looked at the future with a sense of calm choice.

They sat hand-in-hand without looking at each other or speaking for a few minutes: in Maggie’s mind the first scenes of love and parting were more present than the actual moment, and she was looking at Philip in the Red Deeps.

Philip felt that he ought to have been thoroughly happy in that answer of hers: she was as open and transparent as a rock-pool. Why was he not thoroughly happy? Jealousy is never satisfied with anything short of an omniscience that would detect the subtlest fold of the heart.

CHAPTER XI

In the Lane

Maggie had been four days at her aunt Moss's, giving the early June sunshine quite a new brightness in the care-dimmed eyes of that affectionate woman, and making an epoch for her cousins great and small, who were learning her words and actions by heart, as if she had been a transient avatar of perfect wisdom and beauty.

She was standing on the causeway with her aunt and a group of cousins feeding the chickens, at that quiet moment in the life of the farmyard before the afternoon milking-time. The great buildings round the hollow yard were as dreary and tumble-down as ever, but over the old garden-wall the straggling rose-bushes were beginning to toss their summer weight, and the grey wood and old bricks of the house, on its higher level, had a look of sleepy age in the broad afternoon sunlight, that suited the quiescent time. Maggie, with her bonnet over her arm, was smiling down at the hatch of small fluffy chickens, when her aunt exclaimed—

"Goodness me! who is that gentleman coming in at the gate?"

It was a gentleman on a tall bay horse; and the flanks and neck of the horse were streaked black with fast riding. Maggie felt a beating at head and heart—horrible as the sudden leaping to life of a savage enemy who had feigned death.

"Who is it, my dear?" said Mrs. Moss, seeing in Maggie's face the evidence that she knew.

"It is Mr. Stephen Guest," said Maggie, rather faintly. "My cousin Lucy's—— a gentleman who is very intimate at my cousin's."

Stephen was already close to them, had jumped off his horse, and now raised his hat as he advanced.

"Hold the horse, Willy," said Mrs. Moss to the twelve-year-old boy.

“No, thank you,” said Stephen, pulling at the horse’s impatiently tossing head. “I must be going again immediately. I have a message to deliver to you, Miss Tulliver—on private business. May I take the liberty of asking you to walk a few yards with me?”

He had a half-jaded, half-irritated look, such as a man gets when he has been dogged by some care or annoyance that makes his bed and his dinner of little use to him. He spoke almost abruptly, as if his errand were too pressing for him to trouble himself about what would be thought by Mrs. Moss of his visit and request. Good Mrs. Moss, rather nervous in the presence of this apparently haughty gentleman, was inwardly wondering whether she would be doing right or wrong to invite him again to leave his horse and walk in, when Maggie, feeling all the embarrassment of the situation, and unable to say anything, put on her bonnet, and turned to walk towards the gate.

Stephen turned too, and walked by her side, leading his horse.

Not a word was spoken till they were out in the lane, and had walked four or five yards, when Maggie, who had been looking straight before her all the while, turned again to walk back, saying, with haughty resentment—

“There is no need for me to go any farther. I don’t know whether you consider it gentlemanly and delicate conduct to place me in a position that forced me to come out with you—or whether you wished to insult me still further by thrusting an interview upon me in this way.”

“Of course you are angry with me for coming,” said Stephen, bitterly. “Of course it is of no consequence what a man has to suffer—it is only your woman’s dignity that you care about.”

Maggie gave a slight start, such as might have come from the slightest possible electric shock.

“As if it were not enough that I’m entangled in this way—that I’m mad with love for you—that I resist the strongest passion a man can feel, because I try to be true to other claims—but you must treat me as if I were a coarse brute, who would willingly offend you. And

when, if I had my own choice, I should ask you to take my hand, and my fortune, and my whole life, and do what you liked with them! I know I forgot myself. I took an unwarrantable liberty. I hate myself for having done it. But I repented immediately—I've been repenting ever since. You ought not to think it unpardonable: a man who loves with his whole soul, as I do you, is liable to be mastered by his feelings for a moment; but you know—you must believe—that the worst pain I could have is to have pained you—that I would give the world to recall the error."

Maggie dared not speak—dared not turn her head. The strength that had come from resentment was all gone, and her lips were quivering visibly. She could not trust herself to utter the full forgiveness that rose in answer to that confession.

They were come nearly in front of the gate again, and she paused, trembling.

"You must not say these things—I must not hear them," she said, looking down in misery, as Stephen came in front of her, to prevent her from going farther towards the gate. "I'm very sorry for any pain you have to go through; but it is of no use to speak."

"Yes, it *is* of use," said Stephen, impetuously. "It would be of use if you would treat me with some sort of pity and consideration, instead of doing me vile injustice in your mind. I could bear everything more quietly if I knew you didn't hate me for an insolent coxcomb. Look at me—see what a hunted devil I am: I've been riding thirty miles every day to get away from the thought of you."

Maggie did not—dared not look. She had already seen the harassed face. But she said, gently—

"I don't think any evil of you."

"Then, dearest, look at me," said Stephen, in deepest, tenderest tones of entreaty. "Don't go away from me yet. Give me a moment's happiness—make me feel you've forgiven me."

"Yes, I do forgive you," said Maggie, shaken by those tones, and all the more frightened at herself. "But pray let me go in again. Pray go away."

A great tear fell from under her lowered eyelids.

“I can’t go away from you—I can’t leave you,” said Stephen, with still more passionate pleading. “I shall come back again if you send me away with this coldness—I can’t answer for myself. But if you will go with me only a little way, I can live on that. You see plainly enough that your anger has only made me ten times more unreasonable.”

Maggie turned. But Tancred, the bay horse, began to make such spirited remonstrances against this frequent change of direction, that Stephen, catching sight of Willy Moss peeping through the gate, called out, “Here! just come and hold my horse for five minutes.”

“O no,” said Maggie, hurriedly, “my aunt will think it so strange.”

“Never mind,” Stephen answered, impatiently; “they don’t know the people at St. Ogg’s. Lead him up and down just here, for five minutes,” he added to Willy, who was now close to them; and then he turned to Maggie’s side, and they walked on. It was clear that she *must* go on now.

“Take my arm,” said Stephen, entreatingly; and she took it, feeling all the while as if she were sliding downwards in a nightmare.

“There is no end to this misery,” she began, struggling to repel the influence by speech. “It is wicked—base—ever allowing a word or look that Lucy—that others might not have seen. Think of Lucy.”

“I do think of her—bless her. If I didn’t——” Stephen had laid his hand on Maggie’s that rested on his arm, and they both felt it difficult to speak.

“And I have other ties,” Maggie went on, at last, with a desperate effort,—“even if Lucy did not exist.”

“You are engaged to Philip Wakem?” said Stephen, hastily. “Is it so?”

“I consider myself engaged to him—I don’t mean to marry any one else.”

Stephen was silent again until they had turned out of the sun into a side lane, all grassy and sheltered. Then he burst out impetuously —

“It is unnatural—it is horrible. Maggie, if you loved me as I love you, we should throw everything else to the winds for the sake of belonging to each other. We should break all these mistaken ties that were made in blindness, and determine to marry each other.”

“I would rather die than fall into that temptation,” said Maggie, with deep, slow distinctness—all the gathered spiritual force of painful years coming to her aid in this extremity. She drew her arm from his as she spoke.

“Tell me, then, that you don’t care for me,” he said, almost violently. “Tell me that you love some one else better.”

It darted through Maggie’s mind that here was a mode of releasing herself from outward struggle—to tell Stephen that her whole heart was Philip’s. But her lips would not utter that, and she was silent.

“If you do love me, dearest,” said Stephen, gently, taking up her hand again and laying it within his arm, “it is better—it is right that we should marry each other. We can’t help the pain it will give. It is come upon us without our seeking: it is natural—it has taken hold of me in spite of every effort I have made to resist it. God knows, I’ve been trying to be faithful to tacit engagements, and I’ve only made things worse—I’d better have given way at first.”

Maggie was silent. If it were *not* wrong—if she were once convinced of that, and need no longer beat and struggle against this current, soft and yet strong as the summer stream!

“Say ‘yes,’ dearest,” said Stephen, leaning to look entreatingly in her face. “What could we care about in the whole world beside, if we belonged to each other?”

Her breath was on his face—his lips were very near hers—but there was a great dread dwelling in his love for her.

Her lips and eyelids quivered; she opened her eyes full on his for an instant, like a lovely wild animal timid and struggling under caresses, and then turned sharp round towards home again.

“And after all,” he went on, in an impatient tone, trying to defeat his own scruples as well as hers, “I am breaking no positive engagement: if Lucy’s affections had been withdrawn from me and given to some one else, I should have felt no right to assert a claim on her. If you are not absolutely pledged to Philip, we are neither of us bound.”

“You don’t believe that—it is not your real feeling,” said Maggie, earnestly. “You feel, as I do, that the real tie lies in the feelings and expectations we have raised in other minds. Else all pledges might be broken, when there was no outward penalty. There would be no such thing as faithfulness.”

Stephen was silent: he could not pursue that argument; the opposite conviction had wrought in him too strongly through his previous time of struggle. But it soon presented itself in a new form.

“The pledge *can’t* be fulfilled,” he said, with impetuous insistance. “It is unnatural: we can only pretend to give ourselves to any one else. There is wrong in that too—there may be misery in it for *them* as well as for us. Maggie, you must see that—you do see that.”

He was looking eagerly at her face for the least sign of compliance; his large, firm, gentle grasp was on her hand. She was silent for a few moments, with her eyes fixed on the ground; then she drew a deep breath, and said, looking up at him with solemn sadness—

“O it is difficult—life is very difficult! It seems right to me sometimes that we should follow our strongest feeling;—but then, such feelings continually come across the ties that all our former life has made for us—the ties that have made others dependent on us—and would cut them in two. If life were quite easy and simple, as it might have been in paradise, and we could always see that one being first towards whom.… I mean, if life did not make duties for us before love comes, love would be a sign that two people ought to

belong to each other. But I see—I feel it is not so now: there are things we must renounce in life; some of us must resign love. Many things are difficult and dark to me; but I see one thing quite clearly —that I must not, cannot, seek my own happiness by sacrificing others. Love is natural; but surely pity and faithfulness and memory are natural too. And they would live in me still, and punish me if I did not obey them. I should be haunted by the suffering I had caused. Our love would be poisoned. Don't urge me; help me—help me, *because* I love you."

Maggie had become more and more earnest as she went on; her face had become flushed, and her eyes fuller and fuller of appealing love. Stephen had the fibre of nobleness in him that vibrated to her appeal: but in the same moment—how could it be otherwise?—that pleading beauty gained new power over him.

"Dearest," he said, in scarcely more than a whisper, while his arm stole round her, "I'll do, I'll bear anything you wish. But—one kiss—one—the last—before we part."

One kiss—and then a long look—until Maggie said tremulously, "Let me go—let us make haste back."

She hurried along, and not another word was spoken. Stephen stood still and beckoned when they came within sight of Willy and the horse, and Maggie went on through the gate. Mrs. Moss was standing alone at the door of the old porch: she had sent all the cousins in, with kind thoughtfulness. It might be a joyful thing that Maggie had a rich and handsome lover, but she would naturally feel embarrassed at coming in again:—and it might *not* be joyful. In either case, Mrs. Moss waited anxiously to receive Maggie by herself. The speaking face told plainly enough that, if there was joy, it was of a very agitating, dubious sort.

"Sit down here a bit, my dear." She drew Maggie into the porch, and sat down on the bench by her:—there was no privacy in the house.

"O aunt Gritty, I'm very wretched. I wish I could have died when I was fifteen. It seemed so easy to give things up then—it is so hard

now.”

The poor child threw her arms round her aunt’s neck, and fell into long, deep sobs.

CHAPTER XII

A Family Party

Maggie left her good aunt Gritty at the end of the week, and went to Garum Firs to pay her visit to aunt Pullet according to agreement. In the mean time very unexpected things had happened, and there was to be a family party at Garum to discuss and celebrate a change in the fortunes of the Tullivers, which was likely finally to carry away the shadow of their demerits like the last limb of an eclipse, and cause their hitherto obscured virtues to shine forth in full-rounded splendour. It is pleasant to know that a new ministry just come into office are not the only fellow-men who enjoy a period of high appreciation and full-blown eulogy: in many respectable families throughout this realm, relatives becoming creditable meet with a similar cordiality of recognition, which, in its fine freedom from the coercion of any antecedents, suggests the hopeful possibility that we may some day without any notice find ourselves in full millennium, with cockatrices who have ceased to bite, and wolves that no longer show their teeth with any but the blandest intentions.

Lucy came so early as to have the start even of aunt Glegg; for she longed to have some undisturbed talk with Maggie about the wonderful news. It seemed—did it not? said Lucy, with her prettiest air of wisdom—as if everything, even other people's misfortunes (poor creatures!) were conspiring now to make poor dear aunt Tulliver, and cousin Tom, and naughty Maggie too, if she were not obstinately bent on the contrary, as happy as they deserved to be after all their troubles. To think that the very day—the *very day*—after Tom had come back from Newcastle, that unfortunate young Jetsome, whom Mr. Wakem had placed at the Mill, had been pitched off his horse in a drunken fit, and was lying at St. Ogg's in a dangerous state, so that Wakem had signified his wish that the new purchasers should enter on the premises at once! It was very

dreadful for that unhappy young man, but it did seem as if the misfortune had happened then, rather than at any other time, in order that cousin Tom might all the sooner have the fit reward of his exemplary conduct—papa thought so very highly of him. Aunt Tulliver must certainly go to the Mill now, and keep house for Tom: that was rather a loss to Lucy in the matter of household comfort; but then, to think of poor aunty being in her old place again, and gradually getting comforts about her there!

On this last point Lucy had her cunning projects, and when she and Maggie had made their dangerous way down the bright stairs into the handsome parlour, where the very sunbeams seemed cleaner than elsewhere, she directed her manoeuvres, as any other great tactician would have done, against the weaker side of the enemy.

"Aunt Pullet," she said, seating herself on the sofa, and caressingly adjusting that lady's floating cap-string, "I want you to make up your mind what linen and things you will give Tom towards housekeeping; because you're always so generous—you give such nice things, you know; and if you set the example, aunt Glegg will follow."

"That she never can, my dear," said Mrs. Pullet, with unusual vigour, "for she hasn't got the linen to follow suit wi' mine, I can tell you. She'd niver the taste, not if she'd spend the money. Big checks and live things, like stags and foxes, all her table-linen is—not a spot nor a diamont among 'em. But it's poor work, dividing one's linen before one dies—I niver thought to ha' done that, Bessy," Mrs. Pullet continued, shaking her head and looking at her sister Tulliver, "when you and me chose the double diamont, the first flax iver we'd spun—and the Lord knows where yours is gone."

"I'd no choice, I'm sure, sister," said poor Mrs. Tulliver, accustomed to consider herself in the light of an accused person. "I'm sure it was no wish o' mine, iver, as I should lie awake o' nights thinking o' my best bleached linen all over the country."

“Take a peppermint, Mrs. Tulliver,” said uncle Pullet, feeling that he was offering a cheap and wholesome form of comfort, which he was recommending by example.

“O but, aunt Pullet,” said Lucy, “you’ve so much beautiful linen. And suppose you had had daughters! Then you must have divided it, when they were married.”

“Well, I don’t say as I won’t do it,” said Mrs. Pullet, “for now Tom’s so lucky, it’s nothing but right his friends should look on him and help him. There’s the table-cloths I bought at your sale, Bessy; it was nothing but good natur’ o’ me to buy ’em, for they’ve been lying in the chest ever since. But I’m not going to give Maggie any more o’ my Indy muslin and things, if she’s to go into service again, when she might stay and keep me company, and do my sewing for me, if she wasn’t wanted at her brother’s.”

“Going into service,” was the expression by which the Dodson mind represented to itself the position of teacher or governess, and Maggie’s return to that menial condition, now circumstances offered her more eligible prospects, was likely to be a sore point with all her relatives, besides Lucy. Maggie in her crude form, with her hair down her back, and altogether in a state of dubious promise, was a most undesirable niece; but now she was capable of being at once ornamental and useful. The subject was revived in aunt and uncle Glegg’s presence, over the tea and muffins.

“Hegh, hegh!” said Mr. Glegg, good-naturedly patting Maggie on the back, “nonsense, nonsense! Don’t let us hear of you taking a place again, Maggie. Why, you must ha’ picked up half-a-dozen sweethearts at the bazaar: isn’t there one of ’em the right sort of article? Come, now?”

“Mr. Glegg,” said his wife, with that shade of increased politeness in her severity which she always put on with her crisper fronts, “you’ll excuse me, but you’re far too light for a man of your years. It’s respect and duty to her aunts, and the rest of her kin as are so good to her, should have kept my niece from fixing about going

away again without consulting us—not sweethearts, if I'm to use such a word, though it was never heared in *my* family."

"Why, what did they call us, when we went to see 'em, then, eh, neighbour Pullet? They thought us sweet enough then," said Mr. Glegg, winking pleasantly, while Mr. Pullet, at the suggestion of sweetness, took a little more sugar.

"Mr. Glegg," said Mrs. G., "if you're going to be undelicate, let me know."

"La, Jane, your husband's only joking," said Mrs. Pullet; "let him joke while he's got health and strength. There's poor Mr. Tilt got his mouth drawn all o' one side, and couldn't laugh if he was to try."

"I'll trouble you for the muffineer, then, Mr. Glegg," said Mrs. G., "if I may be so bold to interrupt your joking. Though it's other people must see the joke in a niece's putting a slight on her mother's eldest sister, as is the head o' the family; and only coming in and out on short visits, all the time she's been in the town, and then settling to go away without my knowledge—as I'd laid caps out on purpose for her to make 'em up for me,—and me as have divided my money so equal——"

"Sister," Mrs. Tulliver broke in, anxiously, "I'm sure Maggie never thought o' going away without staying at your house as well as the others. Not as it's my wish she should go away at all—but quite contrairy. I'm sure I'm innocent. I've said over and over again, 'My dear, you've no call to go away.' But there's ten days or a fortnight Maggie 'll have before she's fixed to go: she can stay at your house just as well, and I'll step in when I can, and so will Lucy."

"Bessy," said Mrs. Glegg, "if you'd exercise a little more thought, you might know I should hardly think it was worth while to unpin a bed, and go to all that trouble now, just at the end o' the time, when our house isn't above a quarter of an hour's walk from Mr. Deane's. She can come the first thing in the morning, and go back the last at night, and be thankful she's got a good aunt so close to her to come and sit with. I know *I* should, when I was her age."

“La, Jane,” said Mrs. Pullet, “it ’ud do your beds good to have somebody to sleep in ’em. There’s that striped room smells dreadful mouldy, and the glass mildewed like anything. I’m sure I thought I should be struck with death when you took me in.”

“O, there is Tom!” exclaimed Lucy, clapping her hands. “He’s come on Sindbad, as I told him. I was afraid he was not going to keep his promise.”

Maggie jumped up to kiss Tom as he entered, with strong feeling, at this first meeting since the prospect of returning to the Mill had been opened to him; and she kept his hand, leading him to the chair by her side. To have no cloud between herself and Tom was still a perpetual yearning in her, that had its root deeper than all change. He smiled at her very kindly this evening, and said, “Well, Magsie, how’s aunt Moss?”

“Come, come, sir,” said Mr. Glegg, putting out his hand. “Why, you’re such a big man, you carry all before you, it seems. You’re come into your luck a good deal earlier than us old folks did—but I wish you joy, I wish you joy. You’ll get the Mill all for your own again, some day, I’ll be bound. You won’t stop half-way up the hill.”

“But I hope he’ll bear in mind as it’s his mother’s family as he owes it to,” said Mrs. Glegg. “If he hadn’t had them to take after, he’d ha’ been poorly off. There was never any failures, nor lawing, nor wastefulness in our family—nor dying without wills——”

“No, nor sudden deaths,” said aunt Pullet; “allays the doctor called in. But Tom had the Dodson skin: I said that from the first. And I don’t know what *you* mean to do, sister Glegg, but I mean to give him a table-cloth of all my three biggest sizes but one, besides sheets. I don’t say what more I shall do; but *that* I shall do, and if I should die to-morrow, Mr. Pullet, you’ll bear it in mind—though you’ll be blundering with the keys, and never remember as that on the third shelf o’ the left-hand wardrobe, behind the night-caps with the broad ties—not the narrow-frilled uns—is the key o’ the drawer in the Blue Room, where the key o’ the Blue Closet is. You’ll make a mistake, and I shall niver be worthy to know it. You’ve a memory

for my pills and draughts, wonderful—I'll allays say that of you—but you're lost among the keys." This gloomy prospect of the confusion that would ensue on her decease, was very affecting to Mrs. Pullet.

"You carry it too far, Sophy—that locking in and out," said Mrs. Glegg, in a tone of some disgust at this folly. "You go beyond your own family. There's nobody can say I don't lock up; but I do what's reasonable, and no more. And as for the linen, I shall look out what's serviceable, to make a present of to my nephey: I've got cloth as has never been whittened, better worth having than other people's fine holland; and I hope he'll lie down in it and think of his aunt."

Tom thanked Mrs. Glegg, but evaded any promise to meditate nightly on her virtues; and Mr. Glegg effected a diversion for him by asking about Mr. Deane's intentions concerning steam.

Lucy had had her far-sighted views in begging Tom to come on Sindbad. It appeared, when it was time to go home, that the manservant was to ride the horse, and cousin Tom was to drive home his mother and Lucy. "You must sit by yourself, aunty," said that contriving young lady, "because I must sit by Tom; I've a great deal to say to him."

In the eagerness of her affectionate anxiety for Maggie, Lucy could not persuade herself to defer a conversation about her with Tom, who, she thought, with such a cup of joy before him as this rapid fulfilment of his wish about the Mill, must become pliant and flexible. Her nature supplied her with no key to Tom's; and she was puzzled as well as pained to notice the unpleasant change on his countenance when she gave him the history of the way in which Philip had used his influence with his father. She had counted on this revelation as a great stroke of policy, which was to turn Tom's heart towards Philip at once, and, besides that, prove that the elder Wakem was ready to receive Maggie with all the honours of a daughter-in-law. Nothing was wanted, then, but for dear Tom, who always had that pleasant smile when he looked at cousin Lucy, to turn completely round, say the opposite of what he had always said

before, and declare that he, for his part, was delighted that all the old grievances should be healed, and that Maggie should have Philip with all suitable despatch: in cousin Lucy's opinion nothing could be easier.

But to minds strongly marked by the positive and negative qualities that create severity—strength of will, conscious rectitude of purpose, narrowness of imagination and intellect, great power of self-control, and a disposition to exert control over others—prejudices come as the natural food of tendencies which can get no sustenance out of that complex, fragmentary, doubt-provoking knowledge which we call truth. Let a prejudice be bequeathed, carried in the air, adopted by hearsay, caught in through the eye—however it may come, these minds will give it a habitation: it is something to assert strongly and bravely, something to fill up the void of spontaneous ideas, something to impose on others with the authority of conscious right: it is at once a staff and a baton. Every prejudice that will answer these purposes is self-evident. Our good upright Tom Tulliver's mind was of this class: his inward criticism of his father's faults did not prevent him from adopting his father's prejudice; it was a prejudice against a man of lax principle and lax life, and it was a meeting-point for all the disappointed feelings of family and personal pride. Other feelings added their force to produce Tom's bitter repugnance to Philip, and to Maggie's union with him; and notwithstanding Lucy's power over her strong-willed cousin, she got nothing but a cold refusal ever to sanction such a marriage: "but of course Maggie could do as she liked—she had declared her determination to be independent. For Tom's part, he held himself bound by his duty to his father's memory, and by every manly feeling, never to consent to any relation with the Wakems."

Thus, all that Lucy had effected by her zealous mediation was to fill Tom's mind with the expectation that Maggie's perverse resolve to go into a situation again would presently metamorphose itself, as her resolves were apt to do, into something equally perverse, but entirely different—a marriage with Philip Wakem.

CHAPTER XIII

Borne Along by the Tide

In less than a week Maggie was at St. Ogg's again,—outwardly in much the same position as when her visit there had just begun. It was easy for her to fill her mornings apart from Lucy without any obvious effort; for she had her promised visits to pay to her aunt Glegg, and it was natural that she should give her mother more than usual of her companionship in these last weeks, especially as there were preparations to be thought of for Tom's housekeeping. But Lucy would hear of no pretext for her remaining away in the evenings: she must always come from aunt Glegg's before dinner —"else what shall I have of you?" said Lucy, with a tearful pout that could not be resisted. And Mr. Stephen Guest had unaccountably taken to dining at Mr. Deane's as often as possible, instead of avoiding that, as he used to do. At first he began his mornings with a resolution that he would not dine there—not even go in the evening, till Maggie was away. He had even devised a plan of starting off on a journey in this agreeable June weather: the headaches which he had constantly been alleging as a ground for stupidity and silence were a sufficient ostensible motive. But the journey was not taken, and by the fourth morning no distinct resolution was formed about the evenings: they were only foreseen as times when Maggie would still be present for a little while—when one more touch, one more glance, might be snatched. For, why not? There was nothing to conceal between them: they knew—they had confessed their love, and they had renounced each other: they were going to part. Honour and conscience were going to divide them: Maggie, with that appeal from her inmost soul, had decided it; but surely they might cast a lingering look at each other across the gulf, before they turned away never to look again till that strange light had for ever faded out of their eyes.

Maggie, all this time, moved about with a quiescence and even torpor of manner, so contrasted with her usual fitful brightness and ardour, that Lucy would have had to seek some other cause for such a change, if she had not been convinced that the position in which Maggie stood between Philip and her brother, and the prospect of her self-imposed wearisome banishment, were quite enough to account for a large amount of depression. But under this torpor there was a fierce battle of emotions, such as Maggie in all her life of struggle had never known or foreboded: it seemed to her as if all the worst evil in her had lain in ambush till now, and had suddenly started up full-armed, with hideous, overpowering strength! There were moments in which a cruel selfishness seemed to be getting possession of her: why should not Lucy—why should not Philip suffer? *She* had had to suffer through many years of her life; and who had renounced anything for her? And when something like that fulness of existence—love, wealth, ease, refinement, all that her nature craved—was brought within her reach, why was she to forego it, that another might have it—another, who perhaps needed it less? But amidst all this new passionate tumult there were the old voices making themselves heard with rising power, till, from time to time, the tumult seemed quelled. *Was* that existence which tempted her the full existence she dreamed? Where, then, would be all the memories of early striving—all the deep pity for another's pain, which had been nurtured in her through years of affection and hardship—all the divine presentiment of something higher than mere personal enjoyment, which had made the sacredness of life? She might as well hope to enjoy walking by maiming her feet, as hope to enjoy an existence in which she set out by maiming the faith and sympathy that were the best organs of her soul. And then, if pain were so hard to *her*, what was it to others?—"Ah, God! preserve me from inflicting—give me strength to bear it."—How had she sunk into this struggle with a temptation that she would once have thought herself as secure from, as from deliberate crime? When was that first hateful moment in which she had been conscious of a feeling that clashed with her truth, affection, and gratitude, and had not shaken it from her with horror, as if it had

been a loathsome thing?—And yet, since this strange, sweet, subduing influence did not, should not, conquer her—since it was to remain simply her own suffering … her mind was meeting Stephen's in that thought of his, that they might still snatch moments of mute confession before the parting came. For was not he suffering too? She saw it daily—saw it in the sickened look of fatigue with which, as soon as he was not compelled to exert himself, he relapsed into indifference towards everything but the possibility of watching her. Could she refuse sometimes to answer that beseeching look which she felt to be following her like a low murmur of love and pain? She refused it less and less, till at last the evening for them both was sometimes made of a moment's mutual gaze: they thought of it till it came, and when it had come, they thought of nothing else. One other thing Stephen seemed now and then to care for, and that was, to sing: it was a way of speaking to Maggie. Perhaps he was not distinctly conscious that he was impelled to it by a secret longing—running counter to all his self-confessed resolves—to deepen the hold he had on her. Watch your own speech, and notice how it is guided by your less conscious purposes, and you will understand that contradiction in Stephen.

Philip Wakem was a less frequent visitor, but he came occasionally in the evening, and it happened that he was there when Lucy said, as they sat out on the lawn, near sunset—

"Now Maggie's tale of visits to aunt Glegg is completed, I mean that we shall go out boating every day until she goes. She has not had half enough boating because of these tiresome visits, and she likes it better than anything. Don't you, Maggie?"

"Better than any sort of locomotion, I hope you mean," said Philip, smiling at Maggie, who was lolling backward in a low garden-chair, "else she will be selling her soul to that ghostly boatman who haunts the Floss—only for the sake of being drifted in a boat for ever."

"Should you like to be her boatman?" said Lucy. "Because, if you would, you can come with us and take an oar. If the Floss were but a quiet lake instead of a river, we should be independent of any

gentleman, for Maggie can row splendidly. As it is, we are reduced to ask services of knights and squires, who do not seem to offer them with great alacrity."

She looked playful reproach at Stephen, who was sauntering up and down, and was just singing in pianissimo falsetto—

> "The thirst that from the soul doth rise,
> Doth ask a drink divine."

He took no notice, but still kept aloof: he had done so frequently during Philip's recent visits.

"You don't seem inclined for boating," said Lucy, when he came to sit down by her on the bench. "Doesn't rowing suit you now?"

"O, I hate a large party in a boat," he said, almost irritably. "I'll come when you have no one else."

Lucy coloured, fearing that Philip would be hurt: it was quite a new thing for Stephen to speak in that way; but he had certainly not been well of late. Philip coloured too, but less from a feeling of personal offence than from a vague suspicion that Stephen's moodiness had some relation to Maggie, who had started up from her chair as he spoke, and had walked towards the hedge of laurels to look at the descending sunlight on the river.

"As Miss Deane didn't know she was excluding others by inviting me," said Philip, "I am bound to resign."

"No, indeed, you shall not," said Lucy, much vexed. "I particularly wish for your company to-morrow. The tide will suit at half-past ten: it will be a delicious time for a couple of hours to row to Luckreth and walk back, before the sun gets too hot. And how can you object to four people in a boat?" she added, looking at Stephen.

"I don't object to the people, but the number," said Stephen, who had recovered himself, and was rather ashamed of his rudeness. "If I voted for a fourth at all, of course it would be you, Phil. But we won't divide the pleasure of escorting the ladies; we'll take it alternately. I'll go the next day."

This incident had the effect of drawing Philip's attention with freshened solicitude towards Stephen and Maggie; but when they re-entered the house, music was proposed, and Mrs. Tulliver and Mr. Deane being occupied with cribbage, Maggie sat apart near the table where the books and work were placed—doing nothing, however, but listening abstractedly to the music. Stephen presently turned to a duet which he insisted that Lucy and Philip should sing: he had often done the same thing before; but this evening Philip thought he divined some double intention in every word and look of Stephen's, and watched him keenly—angry with himself all the while for this clinging suspicion. For had not Maggie virtually denied any ground for his doubts on her side? and she was truth itself: it was impossible not to believe her word and glance when they had last spoken together in the garden. Stephen might be strongly fascinated by her (what was more natural?), but Philip felt himself rather base for intruding on what must be his friend's painful secret. Still, he watched. Stephen, moving away from the piano, sauntered slowly towards the table near which Maggie sat, and turned over the newspapers, apparently in mere idleness. Then he seated himself with his back to the piano, dragging a newspaper under his elbow, and thrusting his hand through his hair, as if he had been attracted by some bit of local news in the *Laceham Courier*. He was in reality looking at Maggie, who had not taken the slightest notice of his approach. She had always additional strength of resistance when Philip was present, just as we can restrain our speech better in a spot that we feel to be hallowed. But at last she heard the word "dearest" uttered in the softest tone of pained entreaty, like that of a patient who asks for something that ought to have been given without asking. She had never heard that word since the moments in the lane at Basset, when it had come from Stephen again and again, almost as involuntarily as if it had been an inarticulate cry. Philip could hear no word, but he had moved to the opposite side of the piano, and could see Maggie start and blush, raise her eyes an instant towards Stephen's face, but immediately look apprehensively towards himself. It was not evident to her that Philip had observed her; but a pang of shame, under the sense of this concealment, made

her move from her chair and walk to her mother's side to watch the game at cribbage.

Philip went home soon after in a state of hideous doubt mingled with wretched certainty. It was impossible for him now to resist the conviction that there was some mutual consciousness between Stephen and Maggie; and for half the night his irritable, susceptible nerves were pressed upon almost to frenzy by that one wretched fact: he could attempt no explanation that would reconcile it with her words and actions. When, at last, the need for belief in Maggie rose to its habitual predominance, he was not long in imagining the truth:—she was struggling, she was banishing herself—this was the clue to all he had seen since his return. But athwart that belief there came other possibilities that would not be driven out of sight. His imagination wrought out the whole story: Stephen was madly in love with her; he must have told her so; she had rejected him, and was hurrying away. But would he give her up, knowing—Philip felt the fact with heart-crushing despair—that she was made half helpless by her feeling towards him?

When the morning came, Philip was too ill to think of keeping his engagement to go in the boat. In his present agitation he could decide on nothing: he could only alternate between contradictory intentions. First, he thought he must have an interview with Maggie, and entreat her to confide in him; then again, he distrusted his own interference. Had he not been thrusting himself on Maggie all along? She had uttered words long ago in her young ignorance; it was enough to make her hate him that these should be continually present with her as a bond. And had he any right to ask her for a revelation of feelings which she had evidently intended to withhold from him? He would not trust himself to see her, till he had assured himself that he could act from pure anxiety for her, and not from egoistic irritation. He wrote a brief note to Stephen, and sent it early by the servant, saying that he was not well enough to fulfil his engagement to Miss Deane. Would Stephen take his excuse, and fill his place?

Lucy had arranged a charming plan, which had made her quite content with Stephen's refusal to go in the boat. She discovered that her father was to drive to Lindum this morning at ten: Lindum was the very place she wanted to go to, to make purchases—important purchases, which must by no means be put off to another opportunity; and aunt Tulliver must go too, because she was concerned in some of the purchases.

"You will have your row in the boat just the same, you know," she said to Maggie when they went out of the breakfast-room and upstairs together; "Philip will be here at half-past ten, and it is a delicious morning. Now, don't say a word against it, you dear dolorous thing. What is the use of my being a fairy godmother, if you set your face against all the wonders I work for you? Don't think of awful cousin Tom: you may disobey him a little."

Maggie did not persist in objecting. She was almost glad of the plan; for perhaps it would bring her some strength and calmness to be alone with Philip again: it was like revisiting the scene of a quieter life, in which the very struggles were repose, compared with the daily tumult of the present. She prepared herself for the boat, and at half-past ten sat waiting in the drawing-room.

The ring of the door-bell was punctual, and she was thinking with half-sad, affectionate pleasure of the surprise Philip would have in finding that he was to be with her alone, when she distinguished a firm rapid step across the hall, that was certainly not Philip's: the door opened, and Stephen Guest entered.

In the first moment they were both too much agitated to speak; for Stephen had learned from the servant that the others were gone out. Maggie had started up and sat down again, with her heart beating violently; and Stephen, throwing down his cap and gloves, came and sat by her in silence. She thought Philip would be coming soon; and with great effort—for she trembled visibly—she rose to go to a distant chair.

"He is not coming," said Stephen, in a low tone. "I am going in the boat."

“O, we can’t go,” said Maggie, sinking into her chair again. “Lucy did not expect—she would be hurt. Why is not Philip come?”

“He is not well; he asked me to come instead.”

“Lucy is gone to Lindum,” said Maggie, taking off her bonnet, with hurried, trembling fingers. “We must not go.”

“Very well,” said Stephen, dreamily, looking at her, as he rested his arm on the back of his chair. “Then we’ll stay here.”

He was looking into her deep, deep eyes—far-off and mysterious as the starlit blackness, and yet very near, and timidly loving. Maggie sat perfectly still—perhaps for moments, perhaps for minutes—until the helpless trembling had ceased, and there was a warm glow on her cheek.

“The man is waiting—he has taken the cushions,” she said. “Will you go and tell him?”

“What shall I tell him?” said Stephen, almost in a whisper. He was looking at the lips now.

Maggie made no answer.

“Let us go,” Stephen murmured, entreatingly, rising, and taking her hand to raise her too. “We shall not be long together.”

And they went. Maggie felt that she was being led down the garden among the roses, being helped with firm tender care into the boat, having the cushion and cloak arranged for her feet, and her parasol opened for her (which she had forgotten)—all by this stronger presence that seemed to bear her along without any act of her own will, like the added self which comes with the sudden exalting influence of a strong tonic—and she felt nothing else. Memory was excluded.

They glided rapidly along, Stephen rowing, helped by the backward-flowing tide, past the Tofton trees and houses—on between the silent sunny fields and pastures, which seemed filled with a natural joy that had no reproach for theirs. The breath of the young, unwearied day, the delicious rhythmic dip of the oars, the fragmentary song of a passing bird heard now and then, as if it were

only the overflowing of brim-full gladness, the sweet solitude of a twofold consciousness that was mingled into one by that grave untiring gaze which need not be averted—what else could there be in their minds for the first hour? Some low, subdued, languid exclamation of love came from Stephen from time to time, as he went on rowing idly, half automatically: otherwise, they spoke no word; for what could words have been but an inlet to thought? and thought did not belong to that enchanted haze in which they were enveloped—it belonged to the past and the future that lay outside the haze. Maggie was only dimly conscious of the banks, as they passed them, and dwelt with no recognition on the villages: she knew there were several to be passed before they reached Luckreth, where they always stopped and left the boat. At all times she was so liable to fits of absence, that she was likely enough to let her way marks pass unnoticed.

But at last Stephen, who had been rowing more and more idly, ceased to row, laid down the oars, folded his arms, and looked down on the water as if watching the pace at which the boat glided without his help. This sudden change roused Maggie. She looked at the far-stretching fields—at the banks close by—and felt that they were entirely strange to her. A terrible alarm took possession of her.

"O, have we passed Luckreth—where we were to stop?" she exclaimed, looking back to see if the place were out of sight. No village was to be seen. She turned round again, with a look of distressed questioning at Stephen.

He went on watching the water, and said, in a strange, dreamy, absent tone, "Yes—a long way."

"O what shall I do?" cried Maggie, in an agony. "We shall not get home for hours—and Lucy—O God, help me!"

She clasped her hands and broke into a sob, like a frightened child: she thought of nothing but of meeting Lucy, and seeing her look of pained surprise and doubt—perhaps of just upbraiding.

Stephen moved and sat near her, and gently drew down the clasped hands.

“Maggie,” he said, in a deep tone of slow decision, “let us never go home again—till no one can part us—till we are married.”

The unusual tone, the startling words, arrested Maggie’s sob, and she sat quite still—wondering: as if Stephen might have seen some possibilities that would alter everything, and annul the wretched facts.

“See, Maggie, how everything has come without our seeking—in spite of all our efforts. We never thought of being alone together again: it has all been done by others. See how the tide is carrying us out—away from all those unnatural bonds that we have been trying to make faster round us—and trying in vain. It will carry us on to Torby, and we can land there, and get some carriage, and hurry on to York and then to Scotland—and never pause a moment till we are bound to each other, so that only death can part us. It is the only right thing, dearest: it is the only way of escaping from this wretched entanglement. Everything has concurred to point it out to us. We have contrived nothing, we have thought of nothing ourselves.”

Stephen spoke with deep, earnest pleading. Maggie listened—passing from her startled wonderment to the yearning after that belief, that the tide was doing it all—that she might glide along with the swift, silent stream, and not struggle any more. But across that stealing influence came the terrible shadow of past thoughts; and the sudden horror lest now, at last, the moment of fatal intoxication was close upon her, called up feelings of angry resistance towards Stephen.

“Let me go!” she said, in an agitated tone, flashing an indignant look at him, and trying to get her hands free. “You have wanted to deprive me of any choice. You knew we were come too far—you have dared to take advantage of my thoughtlessness. It is unmanly to bring me into such a position.”

Stung by this reproach, he released her hands, moved back to his former place, and folded his arms, in a sort of desperation at the difficulty Maggie’s words had made present to him. If she would not

consent to go on, he must curse himself for the embarrassment he had led her into. But the reproach was the unendurable thing: the one thing worse than parting with her was, that she should feel he had acted unworthily towards her. At last he said, in a tone of suppressed rage—

"I didn't notice that we had passed Luckreth till we had got to the next village; and then it came into my mind that we would go on. I can't justify it: I ought to have told you. It is enough to make you hate me—since you don't love me well enough to make everything else indifferent to you, as I do you. Shall I stop the boat, and try to get you out here? I'll tell Lucy that I was mad—and that you hate me—and you shall be clear of me for ever. No one can blame you, because I have behaved unpardonably to you."

Maggie was paralysed: it was easier to resist Stephen's pleading, than this picture he had called up of himself suffering while she was vindicated—easier even to turn away from his look of tenderness than from this look of angry misery, that seemed to place her in selfish isolation from him. He had called up a state of feeling in which the reasons which had acted on her conscience seemed to be transmuted into mere self-regard. The indignant fire in her eyes was quenched, and she began to look at him with timid distress. She had reproached him for being hurried into irrevocable trespass—she, who had been so weak herself.

"As if I shouldn't feel what happened to you—just the same," she said, with reproach of another kind—the reproach of love, asking for more trust. This yielding to the idea of Stephen's suffering was more fatal than the other yielding, because it was less distinguishable from that sense of others' claims which was the moral basis of her resistance.

He felt all the relenting in her look and tone—it was heaven opening again. He moved to her side, and took her hand, leaning his elbow on the back of the boat, and saying nothing. He dreaded to utter another word, he dreaded to make another movement, that might provoke another reproach or denial from her. Life hung on her consent: everything else was hopeless, confused, sickening

misery. They glided along in this way, both resting in that silence as in a haven, both dreading lest their feelings should be divided again —till they became aware that the clouds had gathered, and that the slightest perceptible freshening of the breeze was growing and growing, so that the whole character of the day was altered.

“You will be chill, Maggie, in this thin dress. Let me raise the cloak over your shoulders. Get up an instant, dearest.”

Maggie obeyed: there was an unspeakable charm in being told what to do, and having everything decided for her. She sat down again covered with the cloak, and Stephen took to his oars again, making haste; for they must try to get to Torby as fast as they could. Maggie was hardly conscious of having said or done anything decisive. All yielding is attended with a less vivid consciousness than resistance; it is the partial sleep of thought; it is the submergence of our own personality by another. Every influence tended to lull her into acquiescence: that dreamy gliding in the boat, which had lasted for four hours, and had brought some weariness and exhaustion—the recoil of her fatigued sensations from the impracticable difficulty of getting out of the boat at this unknown distance from home, and walking for long miles—all helped to bring her into more complete subjection to that strong mysterious charm which made a last parting from Stephen seem the death of all joy, and made the thought of wounding him like the first touch of the torturing iron before which resolution shrank. And then there was the present happiness of being with him, which was enough to absorb all her languid energy.

Presently Stephen observed a vessel coming after them. Several vessels, among them the steamer to Mudport, had passed them with the early tide, but for the last hour they had seen none. He looked more and more eagerly at this vessel, as if a new thought had come into his mind along with it, and then he looked at Maggie hesitatingly.

“Maggie, dearest,” he said, at last, “if this vessel should be going to Mudport, or to any convenient place on the coast northward, it would be our best plan to get them to take us on board. You are

fatigued—and it may soon rain—it may be a wretched business, getting to Torby in this boat. It's only a trading-vessel, but I daresay you can be made tolerably comfortable. We'll take the cushions out of the boat. It is really our best plan. They'll be glad enough to take us: I've got plenty of money about me; I can pay them well."

Maggie's heart began to beat with reawakened alarm at this new proposition; but she was silent—one course seemed as difficult as another.

Stephen hailed the vessel. It was a Dutch vessel going to Mudport, the English mate informed him, and, if this wind held, would be there in less than two days.

"We had got out too far with our boat," said Stephen. "I was trying to make for Torby. But I'm afraid of the weather; and this lady—my wife—will be exhausted with fatigue and hunger. Take us on board—will you?—and haul up the boat. I'll pay you well."

Maggie, now really faint and trembling with fear, was taken on board, making an interesting object of contemplation to admiring Dutchmen. The mate feared the lady would have a poor time of it on board, for they had no accommodation for such entirely unlooked-for passengers—no private cabin larger than an old-fashioned church-pew. But at least they had Dutch cleanliness, which makes all other inconveniences tolerable; and the boat-cushions were spread into a couch for Maggie on the poop with all alacrity. But to pace up and down the deck leaning on Stephen—being upheld by his strength—was the first change that she needed: then came food, and then quiet reclining on the cushions, with the sense that no new resolution *could* be taken that day. Everything must wait till to-morrow. Stephen sat beside her with her hand in his; they could only speak to each other in low tones; only look at each other now and then, for it would take a long while to dull the curiosity of the five men on board, and reduce these handsome young strangers to that minor degree of interest, which belongs, in a sailor's regard, to all objects nearer than the horizon. But Stephen was triumphantly happy. Every other thought or care was thrown into unmarked perspective by the certainty that Maggie must be his.

The leap had been taken now: he had been tortured by scruples, he had fought fiercely with overmastering inclination, he had hesitated; but repentance was impossible. He murmured forth in fragmentary sentences his happiness—his adoration—his tenderness—his belief that their life together must be heaven—that her presence with him would give rapture to every common day—that to satisfy her lightest wish was dearer to him than all other bliss—that everything was easy for her sake, except to part with her; and now they never *would* part; he would belong to her for ever, and all that was his was hers—had no value for him except as it was hers. Such things, uttered in low broken tones by the one voice that has first stirred the fibre of young passion, have only a feeble effect—on experienced minds at a distance from them. To poor Maggie they were very near: they were like nectar held close to thirsty lips: there was, there *must* be, then, a life for mortals here below which was not hard and chill—in which affection would no longer be self-sacrifice. Stephen's passionate words made the vision of such a life more fully present to her than it had ever been before; and the vision for the time excluded all realities—all except the returning sun-gleams which broke out on the waters as the evening approached, and mingled with the visionary sunlight of promised happiness—all except the hand that pressed hers, and the voice that spoke to her, and the eyes that looked at her with grave, unspeakable love.

There was to be no rain, after all; the clouds rolled off to the horizon again, making the great purple rampart and long purple isles of that wondrous land which reveals itself to us when the sun goes down—the land that the evening star watches over. Maggie was to sleep all night on the poop; it was better than going below; and she was covered with the warmest wrappings the ship could furnish. It was still early, when the fatigues of the day brought on a drowsy longing for perfect rest, and she laid down her head, looking at the faint dying flush in the west, where the one golden lamp was getting brighter and brighter. Then she looked up at Stephen, who was still seated by her, hanging over her as he leaned his arm

against the vessel's side. Behind all the delicious visions of these last hours, which had flowed over her like a soft stream, and made her entirely passive, there was the dim consciousness that the condition was a transient one, and that the morrow must bring back the old life of struggle—that there were thoughts which would presently avenge themselves for this oblivion. But now nothing was distinct to her: she was being lulled to sleep with that soft stream still flowing over her, with those delicious visions melting and fading like the wondrous aërial land of the west.

CHAPTER XIV

Waking

When Maggie was gone to sleep, Stephen, weary too with his unaccustomed amount of rowing, and with the intense inward life of the last twelve hours, but too restless to sleep, walked and lounged about the deck with his cigar far on into midnight, not seeing the dark water—hardly conscious there were stars—living only in the near and distant future. At last fatigue conquered restlessness, and he rolled himself up in a piece of tarpauling on the deck near Maggie's feet.

She had fallen asleep before nine, and had been sleeping for six hours before the faintest hint of a midsummer daybreak was discernible. She awoke from that vivid dreaming which makes the margin of our deeper rest: She was in a boat on the wide water with Stephen, and in the gathering darkness something like a star appeared, that grew and grew till they saw it was the Virgin seated in St. Ogg's boat, and it came nearer and nearer, till they saw the Virgin was Lucy and the boatman was Philip—no, not Philip, but her brother, who rowed past without looking at her; and she rose to stretch out her arms and call to him, and their own boat turned over with the movement, and they began to sink, till with one spasm of dread she seemed to awake, and find she was a child again in the parlour at evening twilight, and Tom was not really angry. From the soothed sense of that false waking she passed to the real waking—to the plash of water against the vessel, and the sound of a footstep on the deck, and the awful starlit sky. There was a moment of utter bewilderment before her mind could get disentangled from the confused web of dreams; but soon the whole terrible truth urged itself upon her. Stephen was not by her now: she was alone with her own memory and her own dread. The irrevocable wrong that must blot her life had been committed: she had brought sorrow into the

lives of others—into the lives that were knit up with hers by trust and love. The feeling of a few short weeks had hurried her into the sins her nature had most recoiled from—breach of faith and cruel selfishness; she had rent the ties that had given meaning to duty, and had made herself an outlawed soul, with no guide but the wayward choice of her own passion. And where would that lead her?—where had it led her now? She had said she would rather die than fall into that temptation. She felt it now—now that the consequences of such a fall had come before the outward act was completed. There was at least this fruit from all her years of striving after the highest and best—that her soul, though betrayed, beguiled, ensnared, could never deliberately consent to a choice of the lower. And a choice of what? O God—not a choice of joy, but of conscious cruelty and hardness; for could she ever cease to see before her Lucy and Philip, with their murdered trust and hopes? Her life with Stephen could have no sacredness: she must for ever sink and wander vaguely, driven by uncertain impulse; for she had let go the clue of life—that clue which once in the far-off years her young need had clutched so strongly. She had renounced all delights then, before she knew them, before they had come within her reach. Philip had been right when he told her that she knew nothing of renunciation: she had thought it was quiet ecstasy; she saw it face to face now—that sad patient loving strength which holds the clue of life—and saw that the thorns were for ever pressing on its brow. The yesterday, which could never be revoked—if she could have changed it now for any length of inward silent endurance, she would have bowed beneath that cross with a sense of rest.

Daybreak came and the reddening eastern light, while her past life was grasping her in this way, with that tightening clutch which comes in the last moments of possible rescue. She could see Stephen now lying on the deck still fast asleep, and with the sight of him there came a wave of anguish that found its way in a long-suppressed sob. The worst bitterness of parting—the thought that urged the sharpest inward cry for help, was the pain it must give to *him*. But surmounting everything was the horror at her own possible

failure, the dread lest her conscience should be benumbed again, and not rise to energy till it was too late.—Too late! it was too late already not to have caused misery: too late for everything, perhaps, but to rush away from the last act of baseness—the tasting of joys that were wrung from crushed hearts.

The sun was rising now, and Maggie started up with the sense that a day of resistance was beginning for her. Her eyelashes were still wet with tears, as with her shawl over her head, she sat looking at the slowly-rounding sun. Something roused Stephen too, and, getting up from his hard bed, he came to sit beside her. The sharp instinct of anxious love saw something to give him alarm in the very first glance. He had a hovering dread of some resistance in Maggie's nature that he would be unable to overcome. He had the uneasy consciousness that he had robbed her of perfect freedom yesterday: there was too much native honour in him, for him not to feel that, if her will should recoil, his conduct would have been odious, and she would have a right to reproach him.

But Maggie did not feel that right: she was too conscious of fatal weakness in herself—too full of the tenderness that comes with the foreseen need for inflicting a wound. She let him take her hand when he came to sit down beside her, and smiled at him—only with rather a sad glance; she could say nothing to pain him till the moment of possible parting was nearer. And so they drank their cup of coffee together, and walked about the deck, and heard the captain's assurance that they should be in at Mudport by five o'clock, each with an inward burthen; but in him it was an undefined fear, which he trusted to the coming hours to dissipate; in her it was a definite resolve on which she was trying silently to tighten her hold. Stephen was continually, through the morning, expressing his anxiety at the fatigue and discomfort she was suffering, and alluded to landing and to the change of motion and repose she would have in a carriage, wanting to assure himself more completely by presupposing that everything would be as he had arranged it. For a long while Maggie contented herself with assuring him that she had had a good night's rest, and that she didn't mind

about being on the vessel—it was not like being on the open sea—it was only a little less pleasant than being in a boat on the Floss. But a suppressed resolve will betray itself in the eyes, and Stephen became more and more uneasy as the day advanced, under the sense that Maggie had entirely lost her passiveness. He longed, but did not dare, to speak of their marriage—of where they would go after it, and the steps he would take to inform his father, and the rest, of what had happened. He longed to assure himself of a tacit assent from her. But each time he looked at her, he gathered a stronger dread of the new, quiet sadness with which she met his eyes. And they were more and more silent.

"Here we are in sight of Mudport," he said, at last. "Now, dearest," he added, turning towards her with a look that was halfbeseeching, "the worst part of your fatigue is over. On the land we can command swiftness. In another hour and a half we shall be in a chaise together—and that will seem rest to you after this."

Maggie felt it was time to speak: it would only be unkind now to assent by silence. She spoke in the lowest tone, as he had done, but with distinct decision.

"We shall not be together—we shall have parted."

The blood rushed to Stephen's face.

"We shall not," he said. "I'll die first."

It was as he had dreaded—there was a struggle coming. But neither of them dared to say another word, till the boat was let down, and they were taken to the landing-place. Here there was a cluster of gazers and passengers awaiting the departure of the steamboat to St. Ogg's. Maggie had a dim sense, when she had landed, and Stephen was hurrying her along on his arm, that some one had advanced towards her from that cluster as if he were coming to speak to her. But she was hurried along, and was indifferent to everything but the coming trial.

A porter guided them to the nearest inn and posting-house, and Stephen gave the order for the chaise as they passed through the

yard. Maggie took no notice of this, and only said, “Ask them to show us into a room where we can sit down.”

When they entered, Maggie did not sit down, and Stephen, whose face had a desperate determination in it, was about to ring the bell, when she said, in a firm voice:—

“I’m not going: we must part here.”

“Maggie,” he said, turning round towards her, and speaking in the tones of a man who feels a process of torture beginning, “do you mean to kill me? What is the use of it now? The whole thing is done.”

“No, it is not done,” said Maggie. “Too much is done—more than we can ever remove the trace of. But I will go no farther. Don’t try to prevail with me again. I couldn’t choose yesterday.”

What was he to do? He dared not go near her—her anger might leap out, and make a new barrier. He walked backwards and forwards in maddening perplexity.

“Maggie,” he said at last, pausing before her, and speaking in a tone of imploring wretchedness, “have some pity—hear me—forgive me for what I did yesterday. I will obey you now—I will do nothing without your full consent. But don’t blight our lives for ever by a rash perversity that can answer no good purpose to any one—that can only create new evils. Sit down, dearest; wait—think what you are going to do. Don’t treat me as if you couldn’t trust me.”

He had chosen the most effective appeal; but Maggie’s will was fixed unswervingly on the coming wrench. She had made up her mind to suffer.

“We must not wait,” she said, in a low but distinct voice; “we must part at once.”

“We *can’t* part, Maggie,” said Stephen, more impetuously. “I can’t bear it. What is the use of inflicting that misery on me? the blow—whatever it may have been—has been struck now. Will it help any one else that you should drive me mad?”

“I will not begin any future, even for you,” said Maggie, tremulously, “with a deliberate consent to what ought not to have been. What I told you at Basset I feel now: I would rather have died than fall into this temptation. It would have been better if we had parted for ever then. But we must part now.”

“We will *not* part,” Stephen burst out, instinctively placing his back against the door—forgetting everything he had said a few moments before; “I will not endure it. You’ll make me desperate—I shan’t know what I do.”

Maggie trembled. She felt that the parting could not be effected suddenly. She must rely on a slower appeal to Stephen’s better self—she must be prepared for a harder task than that of rushing away while resolution was fresh. She sat down. Stephen, watching her with that look of desperation which had come over him like a lurid light, approached slowly from the door, seated himself close beside her, and grasped her hand. Her heart beat like the heart of a frightened bird; but this direct opposition helped her. She felt her determination growing stronger.

“Remember what you felt weeks ago,” she began, with beseeching earnestness—“remember what we both felt—that we owed ourselves to others, and must conquer every inclination which could make us false to that debt. We have failed to keep our resolutions; but the wrong remains the same.”

“No, it does *not* remain the same,” said Stephen. “We have proved that it was impossible to keep our resolutions. We have proved that the feeling which draws us towards each other is too strong to be overcome: that natural law surmounts every other; we can’t help what it clashes with.”

“It is not so, Stephen—I’m quite sure that is wrong. I have tried to think it again and again; but I see, if we judged in that way, there would be a warrant for all treachery and cruelty—we should justify breaking the most sacred ties that can ever be formed on earth. If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie? We should have no law but the inclination of the moment.”

“But there are ties that can’t be kept by mere resolution,” said Stephen, starting up and walking about again. “What is outward faithfulness? Would they have thanked us for anything so hollow as constancy without love?”

Maggie did not answer immediately. She was undergoing an inward as well as an outward contest. At last she said, with a passionate assertion of her conviction, as much against herself as against him—

“That seems right—at first; but when I look further, I’m sure it is *not* right. Faithfulness and constancy mean something else besides doing what is easiest and pleasantest to ourselves. They mean renouncing whatever is opposed to the reliance others have in us—whatever would cause misery to those whom the course of our lives has made dependent on us. If we—if I had been better, nobler, those claims would have been so strongly present with me—I should have felt them pressing on my heart so continually, just as they do now in the moments when my conscience is awake—that the opposite feeling would never have grown in me, as it has done: it would have been quenched at once—I should have prayed for help so earnestly—I should have rushed away as we rush from hideous danger. I feel no excuse for myself—none. I should never have failed towards Lucy and Philip as I have done, if I had not been weak, selfish, and hard—able to think of their pain without a pain to myself that would have destroyed all temptation. O, what is Lucy feeling now? She believed in me—she loved me—she was so good to me. Think of her….”

Maggie’s voice was getting choked as she uttered these last words.

“I *can’t* think of her,” said Stephen, stamping as if with pain. “I can think of nothing but you, Maggie. You demand of a man what is impossible. I felt that once; but I can’t go back to it now. And where is the use of *your* thinking of it, except to torture me? You can’t save them from pain now; you can only tear yourself from me, and make my life worthless to me. And even if we could go back, and both fulfil our engagements—if that were possible now—it would be hateful—horrible, to think of your ever being Philip’s wife—of your

ever being the wife of a man you didn't love. We have both been rescued from a mistake."

A deep flush came over Maggie's face, and she couldn't speak. Stephen saw this. He sat down again, taking her hand in his, and looking at her with passionate entreaty.

"Maggie! Dearest! If you love me, you are mine. Who can have so great a claim on you as I have? My life is bound up in your love. There is nothing in the past that can annul our right to each other: it is the first time we have either of us loved with our whole heart and soul."

Maggie was still silent for a little while—looking down. Stephen was in a flutter of new hope: he was going to triumph. But she raised her eyes and met his with a glance that was filled with the anguish of regret—not with yielding.

"No—not with my whole heart and soul, Stephen," she said, with timid resolution. "I have never consented to it with my whole mind. There are memories, and affections, and longings after perfect goodness, that have such a strong hold on me; they would never quit me for long; they would come back and be pain to me—repentance. I couldn't live in peace if I put the shadow of a wilful sin between myself and God. I have caused sorrow already—I know—I feel it; but I have never deliberately consented to it: I have never said, 'They shall suffer, that I may have joy.' It has never been my will to marry you: if you were to win consent from the momentary triumph of my feeling for you, you would not have my whole soul. If I could wake back again into the time before yesterday, I would choose to be true to my calmer affections, and live without the joy of love."

Stephen loosed her hand, and, rising impatiently, walked up and down the room in suppressed rage.

"Good God!" he burst out, at last, "what a miserable thing a woman's love is to a man's! I could commit crimes for you—and you can balance and choose in that way. But you *don't* love me: if you had a tithe of the feeling for me that I have for you, it would be

impossible to you to think for a moment of sacrificing me. But it weighs nothing with you that you are robbing me of *my* life's happiness."

Maggie pressed her fingers together almost convulsively as she held them clasped on her lap. A great terror was upon her, as if she were ever and anon seeing where she stood by great flashes of lightning, and then again stretched forth her hands in the darkness.

"No—I don't sacrifice you—I couldn't sacrifice you," she said, as soon as she could speak again; "but I can't believe in a good for you, that I feel—that we both feel is a wrong towards others. We can't choose happiness either for ourselves or for another: we can't tell where that will lie. We can only choose whether we will indulge ourselves in the present moment, or whether we will renounce that, for the sake of obeying the divine voice within us—for the sake of being true to all the motives that sanctify our lives. I know this belief is hard: it has slipped away from me again and again; but I have felt that if I let it go for ever, I should have no light through the darkness of this life."

"But, Maggie," said Stephen, seating himself by her again, "is it possible you don't see that what happened yesterday has altered the whole position of things? What infatuation is it—what obstinate prepossession that blinds you to that? It is too late to say what we might have done or what we ought to have done. Admitting the very worst view of what has been done, it is a fact we must act on now; our position is altered; the right course is no longer what it was before. We must accept our own actions and start afresh from them. Suppose we had been married yesterday? It is nearly the same thing. The effect on others would not have been different. It would only have made this difference to ourselves," Stephen added, bitterly, "that you might have acknowledged then that your tie to me was stronger than to others."

Again a deep flush came over Maggie's face, and she was silent. Stephen thought again that he was beginning to prevail—he had never yet believed that he should *not* prevail: there are possibilities which our minds shrink from too completely for us to fear them.

“Dearest,” he said, in his deepest, tenderest tone, leaning towards her, and putting his arm round her, “you *are* mine now—the world believes it—duty must spring out of that now: in a few hours you will be legally mine, and those who had claims on us will submit—they will see that there was a force which declared against their claims.”

Maggie’s eyes opened wide in one terrified look at the face that was close to hers, and she started up—pale again.

“O, I can’t do it,” she said, in a voice almost of agony—“Stephen—don’t ask me—don’t urge me. I can’t argue any longer—I don’t know what is wise; but my heart will not let me do it. I see—I feel their trouble now: it is as if it were branded on my mind. *I* have suffered, and had no one to pity me; and now I have made others suffer. It would never leave me; it would embitter your love to me. I *do* care for Philip—in a different way: I remember all we said to each other; I know how he thought of me as the one promise of his life. He was given to me that I might make his lot less hard; and I have forsaken him. And Lucy—she has been deceived—she who trusted me more than any one. I cannot marry you: I cannot take a good for myself that has been wrung out of their misery. It is not the force that ought to rule us—this that we feel for each other; it would rend me away from all that my past life has made dear and holy to me. I can’t set out on a fresh life, and forget that: I must go back to it, and cling to it, else I shall feel as if there were nothing firm beneath my feet.”

“Good God, Maggie!” said Stephen, rising too and grasping her arm, “you rave. How can you go back without marrying me? You don’t know what will be said, dearest. You see nothing as it really is.”

“Yes, I do. But they will believe me. I will confess everything. Lucy will believe me—she will forgive you, and—and—O, *some* good will come by clinging to the right. Dear, dear Stephen, let me go!—don’t drag me into deeper remorse. My whole soul has never consented—it does not consent now.”

Stephen let go her arm, and sank back on his chair, half stunned by despairing rage. He was silent a few moments, not looking at her; while her eyes were turned towards him yearningly, in alarm at this sudden change. At last he said, still without looking at her—

"Go, then—leave me—don't torture me any longer—I can't bear it."

Involuntarily she leaned towards him and put out her hand to touch his. But he shrank from it as if it had been burning iron, and said again—

"Leave me."

Maggie was not conscious of a decision as she turned away from that gloomy averted face, and walked out of the room: it was like an automatic action that fulfils a forgotten intention. What came after? A sense of stairs descended as if in a dream—of flagstones—of a chaise and horses standing—then a street, and a turning into another street where a stage-coach was standing, taking in passengers—and the darting thought that that coach would take her away, perhaps towards home. But she could ask nothing yet; she only got into the coach.

Home—where her mother and brother were—Philip—Lucy—the scene of her very cares and trials—was the haven towards which her mind tended—the sanctuary where sacred relics lay—where she would be rescued from more falling. The thought of Stephen was like a horrible throbbing pain, which yet, as such pains do, seemed to urge all other thoughts into activity. But among her thoughts, what others would say and think of her conduct was hardly present. Love and deep pity and remorseful anguish left no room for that.

The coach was taking her to York—farther away from home; but she did not learn that until she was set down in the old city at midnight. It was no matter: she could sleep there, and start home the next day. She had her purse in her pocket, with all her money in it—a bank-note and a sovereign: she had kept it in her pocket from forgetfulness, after going out to make purchases the day before yesterday.

Did she lie down in the gloomy bedroom of the old inn that night with her will bent unwaveringly on the path of penitent sacrifice? The great struggles of life are not so easy as that; the great problems of life are not so clear. In the darkness of that night she saw Stephen's face turned towards her in passionate, reproachful misery; she lived through again all the tremulous delights of his presence with her that made existence an easy floating in a stream of joy, instead of a quiet resolved endurance and effort. The love she had renounced came back upon her with a cruel charm, she felt herself opening her arms to receive it once more; and then it seemed to slip away and fade and vanish, leaving only the dying sound of a deep thrilling voice that said, "Gone—for ever gone."

BOOK SEVENTH

THE FINAL RESCUE

CHAPTER I

The Return to the Mill

Between four and five o'clock on the afternoon of the fifth day from that on which Stephen and Maggie had left St. Ogg's, Tom Tulliver was standing on the gravel-walk outside the old house at Dorlcote Mill. He was master there now: he had half-fulfilled his father's dying wish, and by years of steady self-government and energetic work he had brought himself near to the attainment of more than the old respectability which had been the proud inheritance of the Dodsons and Tullivers.

But Tom's face, as he stood in the hot still sunshine of that summer afternoon, had no gladness, no triumph in it. His mouth wore its bitterest expression, his severe brow its hardest and deepest fold, as he drew down his hat farther over his eyes to shelter them from the sun, and, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, began to walk up and down the gravel. No news of his sister had been heard since Bob Jakin had come back in the steamer from Mudport, and put an end to all improbable suppositions of an accident on the water by stating that he had seen her land from a vessel with Mr. Stephen Guest. Would the next news be that she was married—or what? Probably that she was not married: Tom's mind was set to the expectation of the worst that could happen—not death, but disgrace.

As he was walking with his back towards the entrance gate, and his face towards the rushing mill-stream, a tall dark-eyed figure, that we know well, approached the gate, and paused to look at him, with a fast-beating heart. Her brother was the human being of whom she had been most afraid, from her childhood upwards: afraid with that fear which springs in us when we love one who is inexorable, unbending, unmodifiable—with a mind that we can never mould ourselves upon, and yet that we cannot endure to

alienate from us. That deep-rooted fear was shaking Maggie now; but her mind was unswervingly bent on returning to her brother, as the natural refuge that had been given her. In her deep humiliation under the retrospect of her own weakness—in her anguish at the injury she had inflicted—she almost desired to endure the severity of Tom's reproof, to submit in patient silence to that harsh disapproving judgment against which she had so often rebelled: it seemed no more than just to her now—who was weaker than she was? She craved that outward help to her better purpose which would come from complete, submissive confession—from being in the presence of those whose looks and words would be a reflection of her own conscience.

Maggie had been kept on her bed at York for a day with that prostrating headache which was likely to follow on the terrible strain of the previous day and night. There was an expression of physical pain still about her brow and eyes, and her whole appearance, with her dress so long unchanged, was worn and distressed. She lifted the latch of the gate and walked in—slowly. Tom did not hear the gate; he was just then close upon the roaring dam: but he presently turned, and, lifting up his eyes, saw the figure whose worn look and loneliness seemed to him a confirmation of his worst conjectures. He paused, trembling and white with disgust and indignation.

Maggie paused too—three yards before him. She felt the hatred in his face: felt it rushing through her fibres; but she must speak.

"Tom," she began, faintly, "I am come back to you—I am come back home—for refuge—to tell you everything."

"You will find no home with me," he answered, with tremulous rage. "You have disgraced us all. You have disgraced my father's name. You have been a curse to your best friends. You have been base—deceitful; no motives are strong enough to restrain you. I wash my hands of you for ever. You don't belong to me."

Their mother had come to the door now. She stood paralysed by the double shock of seeing Maggie and hearing Tom's words.

“Tom,” said Maggie, with more courage, “I am perhaps not so guilty as you believe me to be. I never meant to give way to my feelings. I struggled against them. I was carried too far in the boat to come back on Tuesday. I came back as soon as I could.”

“I can’t believe in you any more,” said Tom, gradually passing from the tremulous excitement of the first moment to cold inflexibility. “You have been carrying on a clandestine relation with Stephen Guest—as you did before with another. He went to see you at my aunt Moss’s; you walked alone with him in the lanes; you must have behaved as no modest girl would have done to her cousin’s lover, else that could never have happened. The people at Luckreth saw you pass—you passed all the other places; you knew what you were doing. You have been using Philip Wakem as a screen to deceive Lucy—the kindest friend you ever had. Go and see the return you have made her: she’s ill—unable to speak—my mother can’t go near her, lest she should remind her of *you.”*

Maggie was half stunned—too heavily pressed upon by her anguish even to discern any difference between her actual guilt and her brother’s accusations, still less to vindicate herself.

“Tom,” she said, crushing her hands together under her cloak, in the effort to speak again. “Whatever I have done, I repent it bitterly. I want to make amends. I will endure anything. I want to be kept from doing wrong again.”

“What *will* keep you?” said Tom, with cruel bitterness. “Not religion; not your natural feelings of gratitude and honour. And he—he would deserve to be shot, if it were not—But you are ten times worse than he is. I loathe your character and your conduct. You struggled with your feelings, you say. Yes! I have had feelings to struggle with; but I conquered them. I have had a harder life than you have had; but I have found *my* comfort in doing my duty. But I will sanction no such character as yours: the world shall know that *I* feel the difference between right and wrong. If you are in want, I will provide for you—let my mother know. But you shall not come under my roof. It is enough that I have to bear the thought of your disgrace: the sight of you is hateful to me.”

Slowly Maggie was turning away with despair in her heart. But the poor frightened mother's love leaped out now, stronger than all dread.

"My child! I'll go with you. You've got a mother."

O the sweet rest of that embrace to the heart-stricken Maggie! More helpful than all wisdom is one draught of simple human pity that will not forsake us.

Tom turned and walked into the house.

"Come in, my child," Mrs. Tulliver whispered. "He'll let you stay and sleep in my bed. He won't deny that, if I ask him."

"No, mother," said Maggie, in a low tone, like a moan. "I will never go in."

"Then wait for me outside. I'll get ready and come with you."

When his mother appeared with her bonnet on, Tom came out to her in the passage, and put money into her hands.

"My house is yours, mother, always," he said. "You will come and let me know everything you want—you will come back to me."

Poor Mrs. Tulliver took the money, too frightened to say anything. The only thing clear to her was the mother's instinct, that she would go with her unhappy child.

Maggie was waiting outside the gate; she took her mother's hand, and they walked a little way in silence.

"Mother," said Maggie, at last, "we will go to Luke's cottage. Luke will take me in. He was very good to me when I was a little girl."

"He's got no room for us, my dear, now; his wife's got so many children. I don't know where to go, if it isn't to one o' your aunts; and I hardly durst," said poor Mrs. Tulliver, quite destitute of mental resources in this extremity.

Maggie was silent a little while, and then said—

"Let us go to Bob Jakin's, mother: his wife will have room for us, if they have no other lodger."

So they went on their way to St. Ogg's—to the old house by the river-side.

Bob himself was at home, with a heaviness at heart which resisted even the new joy and pride of possessing a two months' old baby, quite the liveliest of its age that had ever been born to prince or packman. He would perhaps not so thoroughly have understood all the dubiousness of Maggie's appearance with Mr. Stephen Guest on the quay at Mudport, if he had not witnessed the effect it produced on Tom when he went to report it; and since then, the circumstances which in any case gave a disastrous character to her elopement, had passed beyond the more polite circles of St. Ogg's, and had become matter of common talk, accessible to the grooms and errand-boys. So that when he opened the door and saw Maggie standing before him in her sorrow and weariness, he had no questions to ask, except one, which he dared only ask himself, Where was Mr. Stephen Guest? Bob, for his part, hoped he might be in the warmest department of an asylum understood to exist in the other world for gentlemen who are likely to be in fallen circumstances there.

The lodgings were vacant, and both Mrs. Jakin the larger and Mrs. Jakin the less were commanded to make all things comfortable for "the old Missis and the young Miss"—alas! that she was still "Miss." The ingenious Bob was sorely perplexed as to how this result could have come about—how Mr. Stephen Guest could have gone away from her, or could have let her go away from him, when he had the chance of keeping her with him. But he was silent, and would not allow his wife to ask him a question; would not present himself in the room, lest it should appear like intrusion and a wish to pry; having the same chivalry towards dark-eyed Maggie, as in the days when he had bought her the memorable present of books.

But after a day or two Mrs. Tulliver was gone to the Mill again for a few hours to see to Tom's household matters. Maggie had wished this: after the first violent outburst of feeling, which came as soon as she had no longer any active purpose to fulfil, she was less in need of her mother's presence; she even desired to be alone with her grief. But she had been solitary only a little while in the old sitting-

room that looked on the river, when there came a tap at the door, and turning round her sad face as she said, “Come in,” she saw Bob enter with the baby in his arms and Mumps at his heels.

“We’ll go back, if it disturbs you, Miss,” said Bob.

“No,” said Maggie, in a low voice, wishing she could smile.

Bob, closing the door behind him, came and stood before her.

“You see, we’ve got a little un, Miss, and I wanted you to look at it, and take it in your arms, if you’d be so good. For we made free to name it after you, and it ’ud be better for your takin’ a bit o’ notice on it.”

Maggie could not speak, but she put out her arms to receive the tiny baby, while Mumps snuffed at it anxiously, to ascertain that this transference was all right. Maggie’s heart had swelled at this action and speech of Bob’s: she knew well enough that it was a way he had chosen to show his sympathy and respect.

“Sit down, Bob,” she said presently, and he sat down in silence, finding his tongue unmanageable in quite a new fashion, refusing to say what he wanted it to say.

“Bob,” she said, after a few moments, looking down at the baby, and holding it anxiously, as if she feared it might slip from her mind and her fingers, “I have a favour to ask of you.”

“Don’t you speak so, Miss,” said Bob, grasping the skin of Mumps’s neck; “if there’s anything I can do for you, I should look upon it as a day’s earnings.”

“I want you to go to Dr. Kenn’s, and ask to speak to him, and tell him that I am here, and should be very grateful if he would come to me while my mother is away. She will not come back till evening.”

“Eh, Miss—I’d do it in a minute—it is but a step; but Dr. Kenn’s wife lies dead—she’s to be buried to-morrow—died the day I come from Mudport. It’s all the more pity she should ha’ died just now, if you want him. I hardly like to go a-nigh him yet.”

“O, no, Bob,” said Maggie, “we must let it be—till after a few days, perhaps—when you hear that he is going about again. But

perhaps he may be going out of town—to a distance," she added, with a new sense of despondency at this idea.

"Not he, Miss," said Bob. *"He'll* none go away. He isn't one o' them gentlefolks as go to cry at waterin'-places when their wives die: he's got summat else to do. He looks fine an' sharp after the parish—he does. He christened the little un; an' he was *at* me to know what I did of a Sunday, as I didn't come to church. But I told him I was upo' the travel three parts o' the Sundays—an' then I'm so used to bein' on my legs, I can't sit so long on end—'an' lors, sir,' says I, 'a packman can do wi' a small 'lowance o' church: it tastes strong,' says I; 'there's no call to lay it on thick.' Eh, Miss, how good the little un is wi' you! It's like as if it knowed you: it partly does, I'll be bound—like the birds know the mornin'."

Bob's tongue was now evidently loosed from its unwonted bondage, and might even be in danger of doing more work than was required of it. But the subjects on which he longed to be informed were so steep and difficult of approach, that his tongue was likely to run on along the level rather than to carry him on that unbeaten road. He felt this, and was silent again for a little while, ruminating much on the possible forms in which he might put a question. At last he said, in a more timid voice than usual,—

"Will you give me leave to ask you only one thing, Miss?"

Maggie was rather startled, but she answered, "Yes, Bob, if it is about myself—not about any one else."

"Well, Miss, it's this: *Do* you owe anybody a grudge?"

"No, not any one," said Maggie, looking up at him inquiringly. "Why?"

"O, lors, Miss," said Bob, pinching Mumps's neck harder than ever, "I wish you did—an' 'ud tell me—I'd leather him till I couldn't see—I would—an' the Justice might do what he liked to me arter."

"O, Bob," said Maggie, smiling faintly, "you're a very good friend to me. But I shouldn't like to punish any one, even if they'd done me wrong; I've done wrong myself too often."

This view of things was puzzling to Bob, and threw more obscurity than ever over what could possibly have happened between Stephen and Maggie. But further questions would have been too intrusive, even if he could have framed them suitably, and he was obliged to carry baby away again to an expectant mother.

“Happen you’d like Mumps for company, Miss,” he said when he had taken the baby again. “He’s rare company—Mumps is—he knows iverything, an’ makes no bother about it. If I tell him, he’ll lie before you an’ watch you—as still—just as he watches my pack. You’d better let me leave him a bit; he’ll get fond on you. Lors, it’s a fine thing to hev a dumb brute fond on you; it’ll stick to you, an’ make no jaw.”

“Yes, do leave him, please,” said Maggie. “I think I should like to have Mumps for a friend.”

“Mumps, lie down there,” said Bob, pointing to a place in front of Maggie, “an’ niver do you stir till you’re spoke to.”

Mumps lay down at once, and made no sign of restlessness when his master left the room.

CHAPTER II

St. Ogg's Passes Judgment

It was soon known throughout St. Ogg's that Miss Tulliver was come back: she had not, then, eloped in order to be married to Mr. Stephen Guest—at all events, Mr. Stephen Guest had not married her—which came to the same thing, so far as her culpability was concerned. We judge others according to results; how else?—not knowing the process by which results are arrived at. If Miss Tulliver, after a few months of well-chosen travel, had returned as Mrs. Stephen Guest—with a post-marital *trousseau*, and all the advantages possessed even by the most unwelcome wife of an only son, public opinion, which at St. Ogg's, as elsewhere, always knew what to think, would have judged in strict consistency with those results. Public opinion, in these cases, is always of the feminine gender—not the world, but the world's wife: and she would have seen, that two handsome young people—the gentleman of quite the first family in St. Ogg's—having found themselves in a false position, had been led into a course which, to say the least of it, was highly injudicious, and productive of sad pain and disappointment, especially to that sweet young thing, Miss Deane. Mr. Stephen Guest had certainly not behaved well; but then, young men were liable to those sudden infatuated attachments; and bad as it might seem in Mrs. Stephen Guest to admit the faintest advances from her cousin's lover (indeed it *had* been said that she was actually engaged to young Wakem—old Wakem himself had mentioned it), still she was very young—"and a deformed young man, you know!—and young Guest so very fascinating; and, they say, he positively worships her (to be sure, that can't last!) and he ran away with her in the boat quite against her will—and what could she do? She couldn't come back then: no one would have spoken to her; and how very well that maize-coloured satinette becomes her complexion! It seems as if the folds in front were quite come in; several of her dresses are made so;

—they say he thinks nothing too handsome to buy for her. Poor Miss Deane! She is very pitiable; but then, there was no positive engagement; and the air at the coast will do her good. After all, if young Guest felt no more for her than *that*, it was better for her not to marry him. What a wonderful marriage for a girl like Miss Tulliver—quite romantic! Why, young Guest will put up for the borough at the next election. Nothing like commerce nowadays! That young Wakem nearly went out of his mind—he always *was* rather queer; but he's gone abroad again to be out of the way—quite the best thing for a deformed young man. Miss Unit declares she will never visit Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Guest—such nonsense! pretending to be better than other people. Society couldn't be carried on if we inquired into private conduct in that way—and Christianity tells us to think no evil—and my belief is, that Miss Unit had no cards sent her."

But the results, we know, were not of a kind to warrant this extenuation of the past. Maggie had returned without a *trousseau*, without a husband—in that degraded and outcast condition to which error is well known to lead; and the world's wife, with that fine instinct which is given her for the preservation of Society, saw at once that Miss Tulliver's conduct had been of the most aggravated kind. Could anything be more detestable? A girl so much indebted to her friends—whose mother as well as herself had received so much kindness from the Deanes—to lay the design of winning a young man's affections away from her own cousin, who had behaved like a sister to her! Winning his affections? That was not the phrase for such a girl as Miss Tulliver: it would have been more correct to say that she had been actuated by mere unwomanly boldness and unbridled passion. There was always something questionable about her. That connection with young Wakem, which, they said, had been carried on for years, looked very ill—disgusting, in fact! But with a girl of that disposition!—To the world's wife there had always been something in Miss Tulliver's very physique that a refined instinct felt to be prophetic of harm. As for poor Mr. Stephen Guest, he was rather pitiable than otherwise: a young man

of five-and-twenty is not to be too severely judged in these cases—he is really very much at the mercy of a designing bold girl. And it was clear that he had given way in spite of himself: he had shaken her off as soon as he could; indeed, their having parted so soon looked very black indeed—*for her*. To be sure, he had written a letter, laying all the blame on himself, and telling the story in a romantic fashion so as to try and make her appear quite innocent: of course he would do that! But the refined instinct of the world's wife was not to be deceived: providentially!—else what would become of Society? Why, her own brother had turned her from his door: he had seen enough, you might be sure, before he would do that. A truly respectable young man—Mr. Tom Tulliver: quite likely to rise in the world! His sister's disgrace was naturally a heavy blow to him. It was to be hoped that she would go out of the neighbourhood—to America, or anywhere—so as to purify the air of St. Ogg's from the taint of her presence, extremely dangerous to daughters there! No good could happen to her: it was only to be hoped she would repent, and that God would have mercy on her: He had not the care of Society on His hands—as the world's wife had.

It required nearly a fortnight for fine instinct to assure itself of these inspirations; indeed, it was a whole week before Stephen's letter came, telling his father the facts, and adding that he was gone across to Holland—had drawn upon the agent at Mudport for money—was incapable of any resolution at present.

Maggie, all this while, was too entirely filled with a more agonising anxiety to spend any thought on the view that was being taken of her conduct by the world of St. Ogg's: anxiety about Stephen—Lucy—Philip—beat on her poor heart in a hard, driving, ceaseless storm of mingled love, remorse, and pity. If she had thought of rejection and injustice at all, it would have seemed to her that they had done their worst—that she could hardly feel any stroke from them intolerable since the words she had heard from her brother's lips. Across all her anxiety for the loved and the injured, those words shot again and again, like a horrible pang that would have brought misery and dread even into a heaven of

delights. The idea of ever recovering happiness never glimmered in her mind for a moment; it seemed as if every sensitive fibre in her were too entirely preoccupied by pain ever to vibrate again to another influence. Life stretched before her as one act of penitence, and all she craved, as she dwelt on her future lot, was something to guarantee her from more falling: her own weakness haunted her like a vision of hideous possibilities, that made no peace conceivable except such as lay in the sense of a sure refuge.

But she was not without practical intentions: the love of independence was too strong an inheritance and a habit for her not to remember that she must get her bread; and when other projects looked vague, she fell back on that of returning to her plain sewing, and so getting enough to pay for her lodging at Bob's. She meant to persuade her mother to return to the Mill by-and-by, and live with Tom again; and somehow or other she would maintain herself at St. Ogg's. Dr. Kenn would perhaps help her and advise her. She remembered his parting words at the bazaar. She remembered the momentary feeling of reliance that had sprung in her when he was talking with her, and she waited with yearning expectation for the opportunity of confiding everything to him. Her mother called every day at Mr. Deane's to learn how Lucy was: the report was always sad—nothing had yet roused her from the feeble passivity which had come on with the first shock. But of Philip, Mrs. Tulliver had learned nothing: naturally, no one whom she met would speak to her about what related to her daughter. But at last she summoned courage to go and see sister Glegg, who of course would know everything, and had been even to see Tom at the Mill in Mrs. Tulliver's absence, though he had said nothing of what had passed on the occasion.

As soon as her mother was gone, Maggie put on her bonnet. She had resolved on walking to the Rectory and asking to see Dr. Kenn: he was in deep grief—but the grief of another does not jar upon us in such circumstances. It was the first time she had been beyond the door since her return; nevertheless her mind was so bent on the purpose of her walk, that the unpleasantness of meeting people on

the way, and being stared at, did not occur to her. But she had no sooner passed beyond the narrower streets which she had to thread from Bob's dwelling, than she became aware of unusual glances cast at her; and this consciousness made her hurry along nervously, afraid to look to right or left. Presently, however, she came full on Mrs. and Miss Turnbull, old acquaintances of her family; they both looked at her strangely, and turned a little aside without speaking. All hard looks were pain to Maggie, but her self-reproach was too strong for resentment: no wonder they will not speak to me, she thought—they are very fond of Lucy. But now she knew that she was about to pass a group of gentlemen, who were standing at the door of the billiard-rooms, and she could not help seeing young Torry step out a little with his glass at his eye, and bow to her with that air of nonchalance which he might have bestowed on a friendly bar-maid. Maggie's pride was too intense for her not to feel that sting, even in the midst of her sorrow; and for the first time the thought took strong hold of her that she would have other obloquy cast on her besides that which was felt to be due to her breach of faith towards Lucy. But she was at the Rectory now; there, perhaps, she would find something else than retribution. Retribution may come from any voice: the hardest, cruelest, most imbruted urchin at the street-corner can inflict it: surely help and pity are rarer things —more needful for the righteous to bestow.

She was shown up at once, after being announced, into Dr. Kenn's study, where he sat amongst piled-up books, for which he had little appetite, leaning his cheek against the head of his youngest child, a girl of three. The child was sent away with the servant, and when the door was closed, Dr. Kenn said, placing a chair for Maggie,—

"I was coming to see you, Miss Tulliver; you have anticipated me; I am glad you did."

Maggie looked at him with her childlike directness as she had done at the bazaar, and said, "I want to tell you everything." But her eyes filled fast with tears as she said it, and all the pent-up excitement of her humiliating walk would have its vent before she could say more.

“Do tell me everything,” Dr. Kenn said, with quiet kindness in his grave firm voice. “Think of me as one to whom a long experience has been granted, which may enable him to help you.”

In rather broken sentences, and with some effort at first, but soon with the greater ease that came from a sense of relief in the confidence, Maggie told the brief story of a struggle that must be the beginning of a long sorrow. Only the day before, Dr. Kenn had been made acquainted with the contents of Stephen’s letter, and he had believed them at once, without the confirmation of Maggie’s statement. That involuntary plaint of hers, *“O, I must go,”* had remained with him as the sign that she was undergoing some inward conflict.

Maggie dwelt the longest on the feeling which had made her come back to her mother and brother, which made her cling to all the memories of the past. When she had ended, Dr. Kenn was silent for some minutes: there was a difficulty on his mind. He rose, and walked up and down the hearth with his hands behind him. At last he seated himself again, and said, looking at Maggie—

“Your prompting to go to your nearest friends—to remain where all the ties of your life have been formed—is a true prompting, to which the Church in its original constitution and discipline responds—opening its arms to the penitent—watching over its children to the last—never abandoning them until they are hopelessly reprobate. And the Church ought to represent the feeling of the community, so that every parish should be a family knit together by Christian brotherhood under a spiritual father. But the ideas of discipline and Christian fraternity are entirely relaxed—they can hardly be said to exist in the public mind: they hardly survive except in the partial, contradictory form they have taken in the narrow communities of schismatics; and if I were not supported by the firm faith that the Church must ultimately recover the full force of that constitution which is alone fitted to human needs, I should often lose heart at observing the want of fellowship and sense of mutual responsibility among my own flock. At present everything seems tending towards the relaxation of ties—towards the

substitution of wayward choice for the adherence to obligation, which has its roots in the past. Your conscience and your heart have given you true light on this point, Miss Tulliver; and I have said all this that you may know what my wish about you—what my advice to you—would be, if they sprang from my own feeling and opinion unmodified by counteracting circumstances."

Dr. Kenn paused a little while. There was an entire absence of effusive benevolence in his manner; there was something almost cold in the gravity of his look and voice. If Maggie had not known that his benevolence was persevering in proportion to its reserve, she might have been chilled and frightened. As it was, she listened expectantly, quite sure that there would be some effective help in his words. He went on.

"Your inexperience of the world, Miss Tulliver, prevents you from anticipating fully the very unjust conceptions that will probably be formed concerning your conduct—conceptions which will have a baneful effect, even in spite of known evidence to disprove them."

"O, I do—I begin to see," said Maggie, unable to repress this utterance of her recent pain. "I know I shall be insulted: I shall be thought worse than I am."

"You perhaps do not yet know," said Dr. Kenn, with a touch of more personal pity, "that a letter is come which ought to satisfy every one who has known anything of you, that you chose the steep and difficult path of a return to the right, at the moment when that return was most of all difficult."

"Oh—where is he?" said poor Maggie, with a flush and tremor that no presence could have hindered.

"He is gone abroad: he has written of all that passed to his father. He has vindicated you to the utmost; and I hope the communication of that letter to your cousin will have a beneficial effect on her."

Dr. Kenn waited for her to get calm again before he went on.

"That letter, as I said, ought to suffice to prevent false impressions concerning you. But I am bound to tell you, Miss Tulliver, that not only the experience of my whole life, but my observation within the

last three days, makes me fear that there is hardly any evidence which will save you from the painful effect of false imputations. The persons who are the most incapable of a conscientious struggle such as yours, are precisely those who will be likely to shrink from you; because they will not believe in your struggle. I fear your life here will be attended not only with much pain, but with many obstructions. For this reason—and for this only—I ask you to consider whether it will not perhaps be better for you to take a situation at a distance, according to your former intention. I will exert myself at once to obtain one for you."

"O, if I could but stop here!" said Maggie. "I have no heart to begin a strange life again. I should have no stay. I should feel like a lonely wanderer—cut off from the past. I have written to the lady who offered me a situation to excuse myself. If I remained here, I could perhaps atone in some way to Lucy—to others: I could convince them that I'm sorry. And," she added, with some of the old proud fire flashing out, "I will not go away because people say false things of me. They shall learn to retract them. If I must go away at last, because—because others wish it, I will not go now."

"Well," said Dr. Kenn, after some consideration, "if you determine on that, Miss Tulliver, you may rely on all the influence my position gives me. I am bound to aid and countenance you by the very duties of my office as a parish priest. I will add, that personally I have a deep interest in your peace of mind and welfare."

"The only thing I want is some occupation that will enable me to get my bread and be independent," said Maggie. "I shall not want much. I can go on lodging where I am."

"I must think over the subject maturely," said Dr. Kenn, "and in a few days I shall be better able to ascertain the general feeling. I shall come to see you: I shall bear you constantly in mind."

When Maggie had left him, Dr. Kenn stood ruminating with his hands behind him, and his eyes fixed on the carpet, under a painful sense of doubt and difficulty. The tone of Stephen's letter, which he had read, and the actual relations of all the persons concerned,

forced upon him powerfully the idea of an ultimate marriage between Stephen and Maggie as the least evil; and the impossibility of their proximity in St. Ogg's on any other supposition, until after years of separation, threw an insurmountable prospective difficulty over Maggie's stay there. On the other hand, he entered with all the comprehension of a man who had known spiritual conflict, and lived through years of devoted service to his fellow-men, into that state of Maggie's heart and conscience which made the consent to the marriage a desecration to her: her conscience must not be tampered with: the principle on which she had acted was a safer guide than any balancing of consequences. His experience told him that intervention was too dubious a responsibility to be lightly incurred: the possible issue either of an endeavour to restore the former relations with Lucy and Philip, or of counselling submission to this irruption of a new feeling, was hidden in a darkness all the more impenetrable because each immediate step was clogged with evil.

The great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty is clear to no man who is capable of apprehending it: the question whether the moment has come in which a man has fallen below the possibility of a renunciation that will carry any efficacy, and must accept the sway of a passion against which he had struggled as a trespass, is one for which we have no master-key that will fit all cases. The casuists have become a byword of reproach; but their perverted spirit of minute discrimination was the shadow of a truth to which eyes and hearts are too often fatally sealed—the truth, that moral judgments must remain false and hollow, unless they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot.

All people of broad, strong sense have an instinctive repugnance to the men of maxims; because such people early discern that the mysterious complexity of our life is not to be embraced by maxims, and that to lace ourselves up in formulas of that sort is to repress all the divine promptings and inspirations that spring from growing insight and sympathy. And the man of maxims is the popular

representative of the minds that are guided in their moral judgment solely by general rules, thinking that these will lead them to justice by a ready-made patent method, without the trouble of exerting patience, discrimination, impartiality—without any care to assure themselves whether they have the insight that comes from a hardly-earned estimate of temptation, or from a life vivid and intense enough to have created a wide fellow-feeling with all that is human.

CHAPTER III

Showing That Old Acquaintances Are Capable of Surprising Us

When Maggie was at home again, her mother brought her news of an unexpected line of conduct in aunt Glegg. As long as Maggie had not been heard of, Mrs. Glegg had half-closed her shutters and drawn down her blinds: she felt assured that Maggie was drowned: that was far more probable than that her niece and legatee should have done anything to wound the family honour in the tenderest point. When, at last, she learned from Tom that Maggie had come home, and gathered from him what was her explanation of her absence, she burst forth in severe reproof of Tom for admitting the worst of his sister until he was compelled. If you were not to stand by your "kin" as long as there was a shred of honour attributable to them, pray what were you to stand by? Lightly to admit conduct in one of your own family that would force you to alter your will, had never been the way of the Dodsons; and though Mrs. Glegg had always augured ill of Maggie's future at a time when other people were perhaps less clear-sighted, yet fair-play was a jewel, and it was not for her own friends to help to rob the girl of her fair fame, and to cast her out from family shelter to the scorn of the outer world, until she had become unequivocally a family disgrace. The circumstances were unprecedented in Mrs. Glegg's experience—nothing of that kind had happened among the Dodsons before; but it was a case in which her hereditary rectitude and personal strength of character found a common channel along with her fundamental ideas of clanship, as they did in her lifelong regard to equity in money matters. She quarrelled with Mr. Glegg, whose kindness, flowing entirely into compassion for Lucy, made him as hard in his judgment of Maggie as Mr. Deane himself was; and, fuming against her sister Tulliver because she did not at once come to her for advice and help, shut herself up in her own room with Baxter's "Saints' Rest" from morning till night, denying herself to all visitors,

till Mr. Glegg brought from Mr. Deane the news of Stephen's letter. Then Mrs. Glegg felt that she had adequate fighting-ground—then she laid aside Baxter, and was ready to meet all comers. While Mrs. Pullet could do nothing but shake her head and cry, and wish that cousin Abbot had died, or any number of funerals had happened rather than this, which had never happened before, so that there was no knowing how to act, and Mrs. Pullet could never enter St. Ogg's again, because "acquaintances" knew of it all,—Mrs. Glegg only hoped that Mrs. Wooll, or any one else, would come to her with their false tales about her own niece, and she would know what to say to that ill-advised person!

Again she had a scene of remonstrance with Tom, all the more severe in proportion to the greater strength of her present position. But Tom, like other immovable things, seemed only the more rigidly fixed under that attempt to shake him. Poor Tom! he judged by what he had been able to see; and the judgment was painful enough to himself. He thought he had the demonstration of facts observed through years by his own eyes which gave no warning of their imperfection, that Maggie's nature was utterly untrustworthy, and too strongly marked with evil tendencies to be safely treated with leniency: he would act on that demonstration at any cost; but the thought of it made his days bitter to him. Tom, like every one of us, was imprisoned within the limits of his own nature, and his education had simply glided over him, leaving a slight deposit of polish: if you are inclined to be severe on his severity, remember that the responsibility of tolerance lies with those who have the wider vision. There had arisen in Tom a repulsion towards Maggie that derived its very intensity from their early childish love in the time when they had clasped tiny fingers together, and their later sense of nearness in a common duty and a common sorrow: the sight of her, as he had told her, was hateful to him. In this branch of the Dodson family aunt Glegg found a stronger nature than her own —a nature in which family feeling had lost the character of clanship by taking on a doubly deep dye of personal pride. Mrs. Glegg allowed that Maggie ought to be punished—she was not a woman to

deny that—she knew what conduct was; but punished in proportion to the misdeeds proved against her, not to those which were cast upon her by people outside her own family, who might wish to show that their own kin were better.

"Your aunt Glegg scolded me so as niver was, my dear," said poor Mrs. Tulliver, when she came back to Maggie, "as I didn't go to her before—she said it wasn't for her to come to me first. But she spoke like a sister, too: *having* she allays was, and hard to please—O dear! —but she's said the kindest word as has ever been spoke by you yet, my child. For she says, for all she's been so set again' having one extry in the house, and making extry spoons and things, and putting her about in her ways, you shall have a shelter in her house, if you'll go to her dutiful, and she'll uphold you against folks as say harm of you when they've no call. And I told her I thought you couldn't bear to see anybody but me, you were so beat down with trouble; but she said, 'I won't throw ill words at her—there's them out o' th' family 'ull be ready enough to do that. But I'll give her good advice; an' she must be humble.' It's wonderful o' Jane; for I'm sure she used to throw everything I did wrong at me—if it was the raisin wine as turned out bad, or the pies too hot—or whativer it was."

"O mother," said poor Maggie, shrinking from the thought of all the contact her bruised mind would have to bear, "tell her I'm very grateful—I'll go to see her as soon as I can; but I can't see any one just yet, except Dr. Kenn. I've been to him—he will advise me, and help me to get some occupation. I can't live with any one, or be dependent on them, tell aunt Glegg; I must get my own bread. But did you hear nothing of Philip—Philip Wakem? Have you never seen any one that has mentioned him?"

"No, my dear: but I've been to Lucy's, and I saw your uncle, and he says they got her to listen to the letter, and she took notice o' Miss Guest, and asked questions, and the doctor thinks she's on the turn to be better. What a world this is—what trouble, O dear! The law was the first beginning, an' it's gone from bad to worse, all of a sudden, just when the luck seemed on the turn." This was the first

lamentation that Mrs. Tulliver had let slip to Maggie, but old habit had been revived by the interview with sister Glegg.

“My poor, poor mother!” Maggie burst out, cut to the heart with pity and compunction, and throwing her arms round her mother’s neck, “I was always naughty and troublesome to you. And now you might have been happy if it hadn’t been for me.”

“Eh, my dear,” said Mrs. Tulliver, leaning towards the warm young cheek; “I must put up wi’ my children—I shall never have no more; and if they bring me bad luck, I must be fond on it—there’s nothing else much to be fond on, for my furnitur’ went long ago. And you’d got to be very good once; I can’t think how it’s turned out the wrong way so!”

Still two or three more days passed, and Maggie heard nothing of Philip; anxiety about him was becoming her predominant trouble, and she summoned courage at last to inquire about him of Dr. Kenn, on his next visit to her. He did not even know if Philip was at home. The elder Wakem was made moody by an accumulation of annoyance: the disappointment in this young Jetsome, to whom, apparently, he was a good deal attached, had been followed close by the catastrophe to his son’s hopes after he had done violence to his own strong feeling by conceding to them, and had incautiously mentioned this concession in St. Ogg’s—and he was almost fierce in his brusqueness when any one asked him a question about his son. But Philip could hardly have been ill, or it would have been known through the calling in of the medical man; it was probable that he was gone out of the town for a little while. Maggie sickened under this suspense, and her imagination began to live more and more persistently in what Philip was enduring. What did he believe about her?

At last Bob brought her a letter, without a post-mark, directed in a hand which she knew familiarly in the letters of her own name—a hand in which her name had been written long ago, in a pocket Shakespeare which she possessed. Her mother was in the room, and Maggie, in violent agitation, hurried up-stairs that she might read the letter in solitude. She read it with a throbbing brow.

"MAGGIE,—I believe in you—I know you never meant to deceive me—I know you tried to keep faith to me, and to all. I believed this before I had any other evidence of it than your own nature. The night after I last parted from you I suffered torments. I had seen what convinced me that you were not free; that there was another whose presence had a power over you which mine never possessed; but through all the suggestions—almost murderous suggestions—of rage and jealousy, my mind made its way to belief in your truthfulness. I was sure that you meant to cleave to me, as you had said; that you had rejected him; that you struggled to renounce him, for Lucy's sake and for mine. But I could see no issue that was not fatal for *you;* and that dread shut out the very thought of resignation. I foresaw that he would not relinquish you, and I believed then, as I believe now, that the strong attraction which drew you together proceeded only from one side of your characters, and belonged to that partial, divided action of our nature which makes half the tragedy of the human lot. I have felt the vibration of chords in your nature that I have continually felt the want of in his. But perhaps I am wrong; perhaps I feel about you as the artist does about the scene over which his soul has brooded with love: he would tremble to see it confided to other hands; he would never believe that it could bear for another all the meaning and the beauty it bears for him.

"I dared not trust myself to see you that morning; I was filled with selfish passion; I was shattered by a night of conscious delirium. I told you long ago that I had never been resigned even to the mediocrity of my powers: how could I be resigned to the loss of the one thing which had ever come to me on earth, with the promise of such deep joy as would give a new and blessed meaning to the foregoing pain—the promise of another self that would lift my aching affection into the divine rapture of an ever-springing, ever-satisfied want?

"But the miseries of that night had prepared me for what came before the next. It was no surprise to me. I was certain that he had prevailed on you to sacrifice everything to him, and I waited with equal certainty to hear of your marriage. I measured your love and his by my own. But I was wrong, Maggie. There is something stronger in you than your love for him.

"I will not tell you what I went through in that interval. But even in its utmost agony—even in those terrible throes that love must suffer before it can be disembodied of selfish desire—my love for you sufficed to withhold me from

suicide, without the aid of any other motive. In the midst of my egoism, I yet could not bear to come like a death-shadow across the feast of your joy. I could not bear to forsake the world in which you still lived and might need me; it was part of the faith I had vowed to you—to wait and endure. Maggie, that is a proof of what I write now to assure you of—that no anguish I have had to bear on your account has been too heavy a price to pay for the new life into which I have entered in loving you. I want you to put aside all grief because of the grief you have caused me. I was nurtured in the sense of privation; I never expected happiness; and in knowing you, in loving you, I have had, and still have, what reconciles me to life. You have been to my affections what light, what colour is to my eyes—what music is to the inward ear; you have raised a dim unrest into a vivid consciousness. The new life I have found in caring for your joy and sorrow more than for what is directly my own, has transformed the spirit of rebellious murmuring into that willing endurance which is the birth of strong sympathy. I think nothing but such complete and intense love could have initiated me into that enlarged life which grows and grows by appropriating the life of others; for before, I was always dragged back from it by ever-present painful self-consciousness. I even think sometimes that this gift of transferred life which has come to me in loving you, may be a new power to me.

"Then—dear one—in spite of all, you have been the blessing of my life. Let no self-reproach weigh on you because of me. It is I who should rather reproach myself for having urged my feelings upon you, and hurried you into words that you have felt as fetters. You meant to be true to those words; you *have* been true. I can measure your sacrifice by what I have known in only one half-hour of your presence with me, when I dreamed that you might love me best. But, Maggie, I have no just claim on you for more than affectionate remembrance.

"For some time I have shrunk from writing to you, because I have shrunk even from the appearance of wishing to thrust myself before you, and so repeating my original error. But you will not misconstrue me. I know that we must keep apart for a long while; cruel tongues would force us apart, if nothing else did. But I shall not go away. The place where you are is the one where my mind must live, wherever I might travel. And remember that I am unchangeably yours: yours—not with selfish wishes, but with a devotion that excludes such wishes.

"God comfort you,—my loving, large-souled Maggie. If every one else has misconceived you, remember that you have never been doubted by him whose heart recognised you ten years ago.

"Do not believe any one who says I am ill, because I am not seen out of doors. I have only had nervous headaches—no worse than I have sometimes had them before. But the overpowering heat inclines me to be perfectly quiescent in the daytime. I am strong enough to obey any word which shall tell me that I can serve you by word or deed.

"Yours, to the last,

"PHILIP WAKEM."

As Maggie knelt by the bed sobbing, with that letter pressed under her, her feelings again and again gathered themselves in a whispered cry, always in the same words:

"O God, is there any happiness in love that could make me forget *their* pain.?"

CHAPTER IV

Maggie and Lucy

By the end of the week Dr. Kenn had made up his mind that there was only one way in which he could secure to Maggie a suitable living at St. Ogg's. Even with his twenty years' experience as a parish priest, he was aghast at the obstinate continuance of imputations against her in the face of evidence. Hitherto he had been rather more adored and appealed to than was quite agreeable to him; but now, in attempting to open the ears of women to reason, and their consciences to justice, on behalf of Maggie Tulliver, he suddenly found himself as powerless as he was aware he would have been if he had attempted to influence the shape of bonnets. Dr. Kenn could not be contradicted; he was listened to in silence; but when he left the room, a comparison of opinions among his hearers yielded much the same result as before. Miss Tulliver had undeniably acted in a blamable manner; even Dr. Kenn did not deny that: how, then, could he think so lightly of her as to put that favourable interpretation on everything she had done? Even on the supposition that required the utmost stretch of belief—namely, that none of the things said about Miss Tulliver were true—still, since they *had* been said about her, they had cast an odour round her which must cause her to be shrunk from by every woman who had to take care of her own reputation—and of Society. To have taken Maggie by the hand and said, "I will not believe unproved evil of you: my lips shall not utter it; my ears shall be closed against it; I, too, am an erring mortal, liable to stumble, apt to come short of my most earnest efforts; your lot has been harder than mine, your temptation greater; let us help each other to stand and walk without more falling;"—to have done this would have demanded courage, deep pity, self-knowledge, generous trust—would have demanded a mind that tasted no piquancy in evil-speaking, that felt no self-exaltation in condemning, that cheated itself with no large words

into the belief that life can have any moral end, any high religion, which excludes the striving after perfect truth, justice, and love towards the individual men and women who come across our own path. The ladies of St. Ogg's were not beguiled by any wide speculative conceptions; but they had their favourite abstraction, called Society, which served to make their consciences perfectly easy in doing what satisfied their own egoism—thinking and speaking the worst of Maggie Tulliver, and turning their backs upon her. It was naturally disappointing to Dr. Kenn, after two years of superfluous incense from his feminine parishioners, to find them suddenly maintaining their views in opposition to his; but then, they maintained them in opposition to a Higher Authority, which they had venerated longer. That Authority had furnished a very explicit answer to persons who might inquire where their social duties began, and might be inclined to take wide views as to the starting-point. The answer had not turned on the ultimate good of Society, but on "a certain man" who was found in trouble by the wayside.

Not that St. Ogg's was empty of women with some tenderness of heart and conscience: probably it had as fair a proportion of human goodness in it as any other small trading town of that day. But until every good man is brave, we must expect to find many good women timid: too timid even to believe in the correctness of their own best promptings, when these would place them in a minority. And the men at St. Ogg's were not all brave by any means: some of them were even fond of scandal—and to an extent that might have given their conversation an effeminate character, if it had not been distinguished by masculine jokes, and by an occasional shrug of the shoulders at the mutual hatred of women. It was the general feeling of the masculine mind at St. Ogg's that women were not to be interfered with in their treatment of each other.

And thus every direction in which Dr. Kenn had turned in the hope of procuring some kind recognition and some employment for Maggie, proved a disappointment to him. Mrs. James Torry could not think of taking Maggie as a nursery governess, even temporarily —a young woman about whom "such things had been said," and

about whom “gentlemen joked;” and Miss Kirke, who had a spinal complaint, and wanted a reader and companion, felt quite sure that Maggie’s mind must be of a quality with which she, for her part, could not risk *any* contact. Why did not Miss Tulliver accept the shelter offered her by her aunt Glegg?—it did not become a girl like her to refuse it. Or else, why did she not go out of the neighbourhood, and get a situation where she was not known? (It was not, apparently, of so much importance that she should carry her dangerous tendencies into strange families unknown at St. Ogg’s.) She must be very bold and hardened to wish to stay in a parish where she was so much stared at and whispered about.

Dr. Kenn, having great natural firmness, began, in the presence of this opposition, as every firm man would have done, to contract a certain strength of determination over and above what would have been called forth by the end in view. He himself wanted a daily governess for his younger children; and though he had hesitated in the first instance to offer this position to Maggie, the resolution to protest with the utmost force of his personal and priestly character against her being crushed and driven away by slander, was now decisive. Maggie gratefully accepted an employment that gave her duties as well as a support: her days would be filled now, and solitary evenings would be a welcome rest. She no longer needed the sacrifice her mother made in staying with her, and Mrs. Tulliver was persuaded to go back to the Mill.

But now it began to be discovered that Dr. Kenn, exemplary as he had hitherto appeared, had his crotchets—possibly his weaknesses. The masculine mind of St. Ogg’s smiled pleasantly, and did not wonder that Kenn liked to see a fine pair of eyes daily, or that he was inclined to take so lenient a view of the past; the feminine mind, regarded at that period as less powerful, took a more melancholy view of the case. If Dr. Kenn should be beguiled into marrying that Miss Tulliver! It was not safe to be too confident, even about the best of men: an apostle had fallen, and wept bitterly afterwards; and though Peter’s denial was not a close precedent, his repentance was likely to be.

Maggie had not taken her daily walks to the Rectory for many weeks, before the dreadful possibility of her some time or other becoming the Rector's wife had been talked of so often in confidence, that ladies were beginning to discuss how they should behave to her in that position. For Dr. Kenn, it had been understood, had sat in the schoolroom half an hour one morning, when Miss Tulliver was giving her lessons; nay, he had sat there every morning: he had once walked home with her—he almost *always* walked home with her—and if not, he went to see her in the evening. What an artful creature she was! What a *mother* for those children! It was enough to make poor Mrs. Kenn turn in her grave, that they should be put under the care of this girl only a few weeks after her death. Would he be so lost to propriety as to marry her before the year was out? The masculine mind was sarcastic, and thought *not*.

The Miss Guests saw an alleviation to the sorrow of witnessing a folly in their Rector: at least their brother would be safe; and their knowledge of Stephen's tenacity was a constant ground of alarm to them, lest he should come back and marry Maggie. They were not among those who disbelieved their brother's letter; but they had no confidence in Maggie's adherence to her renunciation of him; they suspected that she had shrunk rather from the elopement than from the marriage, and that she lingered in St. Ogg's, relying on his return to her. They had always thought her disagreeable; they now thought her artful and proud; having quite as good grounds for that judgment as you and I probably have for many strong opinions of the same kind. Formerly they had not altogether delighted in the contemplated match with Lucy, but now their dread of a marriage between Stephen and Maggie added its momentum to their genuine pity and indignation on behalf of the gentle forsaken girl, in making them desire that he should return to her. As soon as Lucy was able to leave home, she was to seek relief from the oppressive heat of this August by going to the coast with the Miss Guests; and it was in their plans that Stephen should be induced to join them. On the very

first hint of gossip concerning Maggie and Dr. Kenn, the report was conveyed in Miss Guest's letter to her brother.

Maggie had frequent tidings through her mother, or aunt Glegg, or Dr. Kenn, of Lucy's gradual progress towards recovery, and her thoughts tended continually towards her uncle Deane's house: she hungered for an interview with Lucy, if it were only for five minutes —to utter a word of penitence, to be assured by Lucy's own eyes and lips that she did not believe in the willing treachery of those whom she had loved and trusted. But she knew that even if her uncle's indignation had not closed his house against her, the agitation of such an interview would have been forbidden to Lucy. Only to have seen her without speaking, would have been some relief; for Maggie was haunted by a face cruel in its very gentleness: a face that had been turned on hers with glad sweet looks of trust and love from the twilight time of memory; changed now to a sad and weary face by a first heart-stroke. And as the days passed on, that pale image became more and more distinct; the picture grew and grew into more speaking definiteness under the avenging hand of remorse; the soft hazel eyes, in their look of pain, were bent for ever on Maggie, and pierced her the more because she could see no anger in them. But Lucy was not yet able to go to church, or any place where Maggie could see her; and even the hope of that departed, when the news was told her by aunt Glegg, that Lucy was really going away in a few days to Scarborough with the Miss Guests, who had been heard to say that they expected their brother to meet them there.

Only those who have known what hardest inward conflict is, can know what Maggie felt as she sat in her loneliness the evening after hearing that news from Mrs. Glegg—only those who have known what it is to dread their own selfish desires as the watching mother would dread the sleeping-potion that was to still her own pain.

She sat without candle in the twilight, with the window wide open towards the river; the sense of oppressive heat adding itself undistinguishably to the burthen of her lot. Seated on a chair against the window, with her arm on the window-sill, she was

looking blankly at the flowing river, swift with the backward-rushing tide—struggling to see still the sweet face in its unreproaching sadness, that seemed now from moment to moment to sink away and be hidden behind a form that thrust itself between, and made darkness. Hearing the door open, she thought Mrs. Jakin was coming in with her supper, as usual; and with that repugnance to trivial speech which comes with languor and wretchedness, she shrank from turning round and saying she wanted nothing: good little Mrs. Jakin would be sure to make some well-meant remarks. But the next moment, without her having discerned the sound of a footstep, she felt a light hand on her shoulder, and heard a voice close to her saying, “Maggie!”

The face was there—changed, but all the sweeter: the hazel eyes were there, with their heart-piercing tenderness.

“Maggie!” the soft voice said. “Lucy!” answered a voice with a sharp ring of anguish in it; and Lucy threw her arms round Maggie’s neck, and leaned her pale cheek against the burning brow.

“I stole out,” said Lucy, almost in a whisper, while she sat down close to Maggie and held her hand, “when papa and the rest were away. Alice is come with me. I asked her to help me. But I must only stay a little while, because it is so late.”

It was easier to say that at first than to say anything else. They sat looking at each other. It seemed as if the interview must end without more speech, for speech was very difficult. Each felt that there would be something scorching in the words that would recall the irretrievable wrong. But soon, as Maggie looked, every distinct thought began to be overflowed by a wave of loving penitence, and words burst forth with a sob.

“God bless you for coming, Lucy.”

The sobs came thick on each other after that.

“Maggie, dear, be comforted,” said Lucy now, putting her cheek against Maggie’s again. “Don’t grieve.” And she sat still, hoping to soothe Maggie with that gentle caress.

“I didn’t mean to deceive you, Lucy,” said Maggie, as soon as she could speak. “It always made me wretched that I felt what I didn’t like you to know.… It was because I thought it would all be conquered, and you might never see anything to wound you.”

“I know, dear,” said Lucy. “I know you never meant to make me unhappy.… It is a trouble that has come on us all:—you have more to bear than I have—and you gave him up, when … you did what it must have been very hard to do.”

They were silent again a little while, sitting with clasped hands, and cheeks leaned together.

“Lucy,” Maggie began again, *“he* struggled too. He wanted to be true to you. He will come back to you. Forgive him—he will be happy then.…”

These words were wrung forth from Maggie’s deepest soul, with an effort like the convulsed clutch of a drowning man. Lucy trembled and was silent.

A gentle knock came at the door. It was Alice, the maid, who entered and said—

“I daredn’t stay any longer, Miss Deane. They’ll find it out, and there ’ll be such anger at your coming out so late.”

Lucy rose and said, “Very well, Alice—in a minute.”

“I’m to go away on Friday, Maggie,” she added, when Alice had closed the door again. “When I come back, and am strong, they will let me do as I like. I shall come to you when I please then.”

“Lucy,” said Maggie, with another great effort, “I pray to God continually that I may never be the cause of sorrow to you any more.”

She pressed the little hand that she held between hers, and looked up into the face that was bent over hers. Lucy never forgot that look.

“Maggie,” she said, in a low voice, that had the solemnity of confession in it, “you are better than I am. I can’t.…”

She broke off there, and said no more. But they clasped each other again in a last embrace.

CHAPTER V

The Last Conflict

In the second week of September, Maggie was again sitting in her lonely room, battling with the old shadowy enemies that were for ever slain and rising again. It was past midnight, and the rain was beating heavily against the window, driven with fitful force by the rushing, loud-moaning wind. For, the day after Lucy's visit, there had been a sudden change in the weather: the heat and drought had given way to cold variable winds, and heavy falls of rain at intervals; and she had been forbidden to risk the contemplated journey until the weather should become more settled. In the counties higher up the Floss, the rains had been continuous, and the completion of the harvest had been arrested. And now, for the last two days, the rains on this lower course of the river had been incessant, so that the old men had shaken their heads and talked of sixty years ago, when the same sort of weather, happening about the equinox, brought on the great floods, which swept the bridge away, and reduced the town to great misery. But the younger generation, who had seen several small floods, thought lightly of these sombre recollections and forebodings; and Bob Jakin, naturally prone to take a hopeful view of his own luck, laughed at his mother when she regretted their having taken a house by the river-side; observing that but for that they would have had no boats, which were the most lucky of possessions in case of a flood that obliged them to go to a distance for food.

But the careless and the fearful were alike sleeping in their beds now. There was hope that the rain would abate by the morrow; threatenings of a worse kind, from sudden thaws after falls of snow, had often passed off in the experience of the younger ones; and at the very worst, the banks would be sure to break lower down the river when the tide came in with violence, and so the waters would

be carried off, without causing more than temporary inconvenience, and losses that would be felt only by the poorer sort, whom charity would relieve.

All were in their beds now, for it was past midnight: all, except some solitary watchers such as Maggie. She was seated in her little parlour towards the river with one candle, that left everything dim in the room, except a letter which lay before her on the table. That letter which had come to her to-day, was one of the causes that had kept her up far on into the night—unconscious how the hours were going—careless of seeking rest—with no image of rest coming across her mind, except of that far, far off rest, from which there would be no more waking for her into this struggling earthly life.

Two days before Maggie received that letter, she had been to the Rectory for the last time. The heavy rain would have prevented her from going since; but there was another reason. Dr. Kenn, at first enlightened only by a few hints as to the new turn which gossip and slander had taken in relation to Maggie, had recently been made more fully aware of it by an earnest remonstrance from one of his male parishioners against the indiscretion of persisting in the attempt to overcome the prevalent feeling in the parish by a course of resistance. Dr. Kenn, having a conscience void of offence in the matter, was still inclined to persevere—was still averse to give way before a public sentiment that was odious and contemptible; but he was finally wrought upon by the consideration of the peculiar responsibility attached to his office, of avoiding the appearance of evil—an “appearance” that is always dependent on the average quality of surrounding minds. Where these minds are low and gross, the area of that “appearance” is proportionately widened. Perhaps he was in danger of acting from obstinacy; perhaps it was his duty to succumb: conscientious people are apt to see their duty in that which is the most painful course; and to recede was always painful to Dr. Kenn. He made up his mind that he must advise Maggie to go away from St. Ogg’s for a time; and he performed that difficult task with as much delicacy as he could, only stating in vague terms that he found his attempt to countenance her stay was a source of

discord between himself and his parishioners, that was likely to obstruct his usefulness as a clergyman. He begged her to allow him to write to a clerical friend of his, who might possibly take her into his own family as governess; and, if not, would probably know of some other available position for a young woman in whose welfare Dr. Kenn felt a strong interest.

Poor Maggie listened with a trembling lip: she could say nothing but a faint "thank you—I shall be grateful;" and she walked back to her lodgings, through the driving rain, with a new sense of desolation. She must be a lonely wanderer; she must go out among fresh faces, that would look at her wonderingly, because the days did not seem joyful to her; she must begin a new life, in which she would have to rouse herself to receive new impressions—and she was so unspeakably, sickeningly weary! There was no home, no help for the erring: even those who pitied were constrained to hardness. But ought she to complain? Ought she to shrink in this way from the long penance of life, which was all the possibility she had of lightening the load to some other sufferers, and so changing that passionate error into a new force of unselfish human love? All the next day she sat in her lonely room, with a window darkened by the cloud and the driving rain, thinking of that future, and wrestling for patience:—for what repose could poor Maggie ever win except by wrestling?

And on the third day—this day of which she had just sat out the close—the letter had come which was lying on the table before her.

The letter was from Stephen. He was come back from Holland: he was at Mudport again, unknown to any of his friends; and had written to her from that place, enclosing the letter to a person whom he trusted in St. Ogg's. From beginning to end it was a passionate cry of reproach: an appeal against her useless sacrifice of him—of herself: against that perverted notion of right which led her to crush all his hopes, for the sake of a mere idea, and not any substantial good—*his* hopes, whom she loved, and who loved her with that single overpowering passion, that worship, which a man never gives to a woman more than once in his life.

“They have written to me that you are to marry Kenn. As if I should believe that! Perhaps they have told you some such fables about me. Perhaps they tell you I have been ‘travelling.’ My body has been dragged about somewhere; but *I* have never travelled from the hideous place where you left me—where I started up from the stupor of helpless rage to find you gone.

“Maggie! whose pain can have been like mine? Whose injury is like mine? Who besides me has met that long look of love that has burnt itself into my soul, so that no other image can come there? Maggie, call me back to you!—call me back to life and goodness! I am banished from both now. I have no motives: I am indifferent to everything. Two months have only deepened the certainty that I can never care for life without you. Write me one word—say ‘Come!’ In two days I should be with you. Maggie—have you forgotten what it was to be together?—to be within reach of a look—to be within hearing of each other’s voice?”

When Maggie first read this letter she felt as if her real temptation had only just begun. At the entrance of the chill dark cavern, we turn with unworn courage from the warm light; but how, when we have trodden far in the damp darkness, and have begun to be faint and weary—how, if there is a sudden opening above us, and we are invited back again to the life-nourishing day? The leap of natural longing from under the pressure of pain is so strong, that all less immediate motives are likely to be forgotten—till the pain has been escaped from.

For hours Maggie felt as if her struggle had been in vain. For hours every other thought that she strove to summon was thrust aside by the image of Stephen waiting for the single word that would bring him to her. She did not *read* the letter: she heard him uttering it, and the voice shook her with its old strange power. All the day before she had been filled with the vision of a lonely future through which she must carry the burthen of regret, upheld only by clinging faith. And here—close within her reach—urging itself upon her even as a claim—was another future, in which hard endurance and effort were to be exchanged for easy delicious leaning on

another's loving strength! And yet that promise of joy in the place of sadness did not make the dire force of the temptation to Maggie. It was Stephen's tone of misery, it was the doubt in the justice of her own resolve, that made the balance tremble, and made her once start from her seat to reach the pen and paper, and write "Come!"

But close upon that decisive act, her mind recoiled; and the sense of contradiction with her past self in her moments of strength and clearness, came upon her like a pang of conscious degradation. No—she must wait; she must pray; the light that had forsaken her would come again: she should feel again what she had felt, when she had fled away, under an inspiration strong enough to conquer agony—to conquer love: she should feel again what she had felt when Lucy stood by her, when Philip's letter had stirred all the fibres that bound her to the calmer past.

She sat quite still, far on into the night: with no impulse to change her attitude, without active force enough even for the mental act of prayer: only waiting for the light that would surely come again. It came with the memories that no passion could long quench: the long past came back to her, and with it the fountains of self-renouncing pity and affection, of faithfulness and resolve. The words that were marked by the quiet hand in the little old book that she had long ago learned by heart, rushed even to her lips, and found a vent for themselves in a low murmur that was quite lost in the loud driving of the rain against the window and the loud moan and roar of the wind: "I have received the Cross, I have received it from Thy hand; I will bear it, and bear it till death, as Thou hast laid it upon me."

But soon other words rose that could find no utterance but in a sob: "Forgive me, Stephen! It will pass away. You will come back to her."

She took up the letter, held it to the candle, and let it burn slowly on the hearth. To-morrow she would write to him the last word of parting.

“I will bear it, and bear it till death.… But how long it will be before death comes! I am so young, so healthy. How shall I have patience and strength? Am I to struggle and fall and repent again?—has life other trials as hard for me still?”

With that cry of self-despair, Maggie fell on her knees against the table, and buried her sorrow-stricken face. Her soul went out to the Unseen Pity that would be with her to the end. Surely there was something being taught her by this experience of great need; and she must be learning a secret of human tenderness and long-suffering, that the less erring could hardly know? “O God, if my life is to be long, let me live to bless and comfort——”

At that moment Maggie felt a startling sensation of sudden cold about her knees and feet: it was water flowing under her. She started up: the stream was flowing under the door that led into the passage. She was not bewildered for an instant—she knew it was the flood!

The tumult of emotion she had been enduring for the last twelve hours seemed to have left a great calm in her: without screaming, she hurried with the candle up-stairs to Bob Jakin’s bedroom. The door was ajar; she went in and shook him by the shoulder.

“Bob, the flood is come! it is in the house! let us see if we can make the boats safe.”

She lighted his candle, while the poor wife, snatching up her baby, burst into screams; and then she hurried down again to see if the waters were rising fast. There was a step down into the room at the door leading from the staircase; she saw that the water was already on a level with the step. While she was looking, something came with a tremendous crash against the window, and sent the leaded panes and the old wooden framework inwards in shivers,—the water pouring in after it.

“It is the boat!” cried Maggie. “Bob, come down to get the boats!”

And without a moment’s shudder of fear, she plunged through the water, which was rising fast to her knees, and by the glimmering light of the candle she had left on the stairs, she mounted on to the

window-sill, and crept into the boat, which was left with the prow lodging and protruding through the window. Bob was not long after her, hurrying without shoes or stockings, but with the lanthorn in his hand.

"Why, they're both here—both the boats," said Bob, as he got into the one where Maggie was. "It's wonderful this fastening isn't broke too, as well as the mooring."

In the excitement of getting into the other boat, unfastening it, and mastering an oar, Bob was not struck with the danger Maggie incurred. We are not apt to fear for the fearless, when we are companions in their danger, and Bob's mind was absorbed in possible expedients for the safety of the helpless in-doors. The fact that Maggie had been up, had waked him, and had taken the lead in activity, gave Bob a vague impression of her as one who would help to protect, not need to be protected. She too had got possession of an oar, and had pushed off, so as to release the boat from the overhanging window-frame.

"The water's rising so fast," said Bob, "I doubt it 'll be in at the chambers before long—th' house is so low. I've more mind to get Prissy and the child and the mother into the boat, if I could, and trusten to the water—forth' old house is none so safe. And if I let go the boat … but *you,"* he exclaimed, suddenly lifting the light of his lanthorn on Maggie, as she stood in the rain with the oar in her hand and her black hair streaming.

Maggie had no time to answer, for a new tidal current swept along the line of the houses, and drove both the boats out on to the wide water, with a force that carried them far past the meeting current of the river.

In the first moments Maggie felt nothing, thought of nothing, but that she had suddenly passed away from that life which she had been dreading: it was the transition of death, without its agony—and she was alone in the darkness with God.

The whole thing had been so rapid—so dream-like—that the threads of ordinary association were broken: she sank down on the

seat clutching the oar mechanically, and for a long while had no distinct conception of her position. The first thing that waked her to fuller consciousness was the cessation of the rain, and a perception that the darkness was divided by the faintest light, which parted the overhanging gloom from the immeasurable watery level below. She was driven out upon the flood:—that awful visitation of God which her father used to talk of—which had made the nightmare of her childish dreams. And with that thought there rushed in the vision of the old home—and Tom—and her mother—they had all listened together.

"O God, where am I? Which is the way home?" she cried out, in the dim loneliness.

What was happening to them at the Mill? The flood had once nearly destroyed it. They might be in danger—in distress: her mother and her brother, alone there, beyond reach of help! Her whole soul was strained now on that thought; and she saw the long-loved faces looking for help into the darkness, and finding none.

She was floating in smooth water now—perhaps far on the over-flooded fields. There was no sense of present danger to check the outgoing of her mind to the old home; and she strained her eyes against the curtain of gloom that she might seize the first sight of her whereabout—that she might catch some faint suggestion of the spot towards which all her anxieties tended.

O how welcome, the widening of that dismal watery level—the gradual uplifting of the cloudy firmament—the slowly defining blackness of objects above the glassy dark! Yes—she must be out on the fields—those were the tops of hedgerow trees. Which way did the river lie? Looking behind her, she saw the lines of black trees: looking before her, there were none: then, the river lay before her. She seized an oar and began to paddle the boat forward with the energy of wakening hope: the dawning seemed to advance more swiftly, now she was in action; and she could soon see the poor dumb beasts crowding piteously on a mound where they had taken refuge. Onward she paddled and rowed by turns in the growing twilight: her wet clothes clung round her, and her streaming hair

was dashed about by the wind, but she was hardly conscious of any bodily sensations—except a sensation of strength, inspired by mighty emotion. Along with the sense of danger and possible rescue for those long-remembered beings at the old home, there was an undefined sense of reconcilement with her brother: what quarrel, what harshness, what unbelief in each other can subsist in the presence of a great calamity, when all the artificial vesture of our life is gone, and we are all one with each other in primitive mortal needs? Vaguely, Maggie felt this;—in the strong resurgent love towards her brother that swept away all the later impressions of hard, cruel offence and misunderstanding, and left only the deep, underlying, unshakable memories of early union.

But now there was a large dark mass in the distance, and near to her Maggie could discern the current of the river. The dark mass must be—yes, it was—St. Ogg's. Ah, now she knew which way to look for the first glimpse of the well-known trees—the grey willows, the now yellowing chestnuts—and above them the old roof! But there was no colour, no shape yet: all was faint and dim. More and more strongly the energies seemed to come and put themselves forth, as if her life were a stored-up force that was being spent in this hour, unneeded for any future.

She must get her boat into the current of the Floss, else she would never be able to pass the Ripple and approach the house: this was the thought that occurred to her, as she imagined with more and more vividness the state of things round the old home. But then she might be carried very far down, and be unable to guide her boat out of the current again. For the first time distinct ideas of danger began to press upon her; but there was no choice of courses, no room for hesitation, and she floated into the current. Swiftly she went now, without effort; more and more clearly in the lessening distance and the growing light she began to discern the objects that she knew must be the well-known trees and roofs; nay, she was not far off a rushing muddy current that must be the strangely altered Ripple.

Great God! there were floating masses in it, that might dash against her boat as she passed, and cause her to perish too soon.

What were those masses?

For the first time Maggie's heart began to beat in an agony of dread. She sat helpless—dimly conscious that she was being floated along—more intensely conscious of the anticipated clash. But the horror was transient: it passed away before the oncoming warehouses of St. Ogg's: she had passed the mouth of the Ripple, then: *now*, she must use all her skill and power to manage the boat and get it if possible out of the current. She could see now that the bridge was broken down: she could see the masts of a stranded vessel far out over the watery field. But no boats were to be seen moving on the river—such as had been laid hands on were employed in the flooded streets.

With new resolution, Maggie seized her oar, and stood up again to paddle; but the now ebbing tide added to the swiftness of the river, and she was carried along beyond the bridge. She could hear shouts from the windows overlooking the river, as if the people there were calling to her. It was not till she had passed on nearly to Tofton that she could get the boat clear of the current. Then with one yearning look towards her uncle Deane's house that lay farther down the river, she took to both her oars and rowed with all her might across the watery fields, back towards the Mill. Colour was beginning to awake now, and as she approached the Dorlcote fields, she could discern the tints of the trees—could see the old Scotch firs far to the right, and the home chestnuts—Oh! how deep they lay in the water: deeper than the trees on this side the hill. And the roof of the Mill—where was it? Those heavy fragments hurrying down the Ripple—what had they meant? But it was not the house—the house stood firm; drowned up to the first story, but still firm—or was it broken in at the end towards the Mill?

With panting joy that she was there at last—joy that overcame all distress—Maggie neared the front of the house. At first she heard no sound: she saw no object moving. Her boat was on a level with the up-stairs windows. She called out in a loud piercing voice,

"Tom, where are you? Mother, where are you? Here is Maggie!"

Soon, from the window of the attic in the central gable, she heard Tom's voice:

"Who is it? Have you brought a boat?"

"It is I, Tom—Maggie. Where is mother?"

"She is not here: she went to Garum, the day before yesterday. I'll come down to the lower window."

"Alone, Maggie?" said Tom, in a voice of deep astonishment, as he opened the middle window on a level with the boat.

"Yes, Tom: God has taken care of me, to bring me to you. Get in quickly. Is there no one else?"

"No," said Tom, stepping into the boat, "I fear the man is drowned: he was carried down the Ripple, I think, when part of the Mill fell with the crash of trees and stones against it: I've shouted again and again, and there has been no answer. Give me the oars, Maggie."

It was not till Tom had pushed off and they were on the wide water—he face to face with Maggie—that the full meaning of what had happened rushed upon his mind. It came with so overpowering a force—it was such a new revelation to his spirit, of the depths in life, that had lain beyond his vision which he had fancied so keen and clear—that he was unable to ask a question. They sat mutely gazing at each other: Maggie with eyes of intense life looking out from a weary, beaten face—Tom pale with a certain awe and humiliation. Thought was busy though the lips were silent: and though he could ask no question, he guessed a story of almost miraculous divinely-protected effort. But at last a mist gathered over the blue-grey eyes, and the lips found a word they could utter: the old childish—"Magsie!"

Maggie could make no answer but a long deep sob of that mysterious wondrous happiness that is one with pain.

As soon as she could speak, she said, "We will go to Lucy, Tom: we'll go and see if she is safe, and then we can help the rest."

Tom rowed with untired vigour, and with a different speed from poor Maggie's. The boat was soon in the current of the river again, and soon they would be at Tofton.

"Park House stands high up out of the flood," said Maggie. "Perhaps they have got Lucy there."

Nothing else was said; a new danger was being carried towards them by the river. Some wooden machinery had just given way on one of the wharves, and huge fragments were being floated along. The sun was rising now, and the wide area of watery desolation was spread out in dreadful clearness around them—in dreadful clearness floated onwards the hurrying, threatening masses. A large company in a boat that was working its way along under the Tofton houses, observed their danger, and shouted, "Get out of the current!"

But that could not be done at once, and Tom, looking before him, saw death rushing on them. Huge fragments, clinging together in fatal fellowship, made one wide mass across the stream.

"It is coming, Maggie!" Tom said, in a deep hoarse voice, loosing the oars, and clasping her.

The next instant the boat was no longer seen upon the water—and the huge mass was hurrying on in hideous triumph.

But soon the keel of the boat reappeared, a black speck on the golden water.

The boat reappeared—but brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted: living through again in one supreme moment the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together.

Conclusion

Nature repairs her ravages—repairs them with her sunshine, and with human labour. The desolation wrought by that flood, had left little visible trace on the face of the earth, five years after. The fifth autumn was rich in golden corn-stacks, rising in thick clusters among the distant hedgerows; the wharves and warehouses on the Floss were busy again, with echoes of eager voices, with hopeful lading and unlading.

And every man and woman mentioned in this history was still living—except those whose end we know.

Nature repairs her ravages—but not all. The uptorn trees are not rooted again; the parted hills are left scarred: if there is a new growth, the trees are not the same as the old, and the hills underneath their green vesture bear the marks of the past rending. To the eyes that have dwelt on the past, there is no thorough repair.

Dorlcote Mill was rebuilt. And Dorlcote churchyard,—where the brick grave that held a father whom we know, was found with the stone laid prostrate upon it after the flood,—had recovered all its grassy order and decent quiet.

Near that brick grave there was a tomb erected, very soon after the flood, for two bodies that were found in close embrace; and it was visited at different moments by two men who both felt that their keenest joy and keenest sorrow were for ever buried there.

One of them visited the tomb again with a sweet face beside him —but that was years after.

The other was always solitary. His great companionship was among the trees of the Red Deeps, where the buried joy seemed still to hover—like a revisiting spirit.

The tomb bore the names of Tom and Maggie Tulliver, and below the names it was written—

“IN THEIR DEATH THEY WERE NOT DIVIDED.”

Notes

In preparing these explanatory notes, I have profited from consulting previous editions of the novel: A. S. Byatt's for Penguin Classics (1979) and Gordon S. Haight's for World's Classics (1981). I have also benefited from Beryl Gray's more recent edition for Everyman's Library (1996). I have indicated in the notes where I am indebted to these editions for information or suggestions. Quotations from the manuscript of *The Mill on the Floss* are from Haight.

BOOK FIRST. BOY AND GIRL

Chapter I. Outside Dorlcote Mill

1 *oil-bearing seed:* linseed.

2 *the town of St. Ogg's:* long identified with Gainsborough in Lincolnshire; standing on the river Trent, the small North Sea river port deals mostly with barge traffic.

3 *withy:* willow.

4 *beaver bonnet:* in medieval armor, the beaver (Fr. "bavière") was the covering for the lower part of the face, the visor being that for the upper part. In later usage, the former became confused with the latter. Hence, a "beaver bonnet" refers to those early-nineteenth-century women's hats that protrude over the forehead and temples, like a raised visor.

5 *that very afternoon I have been dreaming of:* given the repeated allusions in *The Mill on the Floss* to John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678, Part II 1684), it is perhaps worth pointing out that the narrator of Bunyan's great allegory, like Eliot's narrator, relates his tale on waking from a dream: "As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a den, and laid me down in that place to sleep; and, as I slept, I dreamed a dream" (Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* [Edinburgh and New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1898], p. 13).

Chapter II. Mr. Tulliver, of Dorlcote Mill, Declares His Resolution About Tom

1 *Ladyday:* March 25, to commemorate the Annunciation of Our Lady, the Virgin Mary. (Originally there were four "Lady Days," each celebrating an event in the life of Mary.) Until 1752, Lady Day was the legal/financial beginning of the year.

2 *Holland:* cloth thought to be of superior quality, so called because it was originally made in and imported from Holland.

3 *Bedlam:* the Hospital of St. Mary of Bethlehem, dating from the twelfth century, officially became a lunatic asylum in 1547. The word has been proverbial for madness since the early sixteenth century.

4 *franzy:* wild, frenzied.

5 *those early Madonnas of Raphael:* probably referring to those paintings of Raphael (1483–1520) painted during the artist's Florentine period *(c*. 1504–8), which concentrated on depicting the Virgin, the Christ Child, Elizabeth, and the young John the Baptist, in which the healthiness and solidity of the figures contrasted markedly with the serenity of their expressions.

Chapter III. Mr. Riley Gives His Advice Concerning a School for Tom

1 *had his comb cut:* i.e., was humiliated; the "comb" referred to is the red crest found on the domestic fowl. The expression dates back at least as far as the mid-sixteenth century.

2 *Old Harry:* the devil. *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable* tells us that the name may contain some allusion to the word *harry*, meaning to plunder, harass, lay waste, from which comes the old *harrow*, as in the title of the thirteenth-century miracle play *The Harrowing of Hell*.

3 *Manichœism:* a system of beliefs based on the teachings of the Persian prophet Mani/Manichœus (c. A.D. 216–276 or 277), which claims that the universe is controlled by two antagonistic powers: light or goodness (identifiable with God); and darkness, chaos, or evil.

4 *Hotspur:* Harry Percy (nicknamed "Hotspur" because of his fiery temperament, hence the allusion here), in Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part One*.

5 *'The History of the Devil,' by Daniel Defoe:* Defoe's *Satan's Devices; or the Political History of the Devil: Ancient and Modern* (1726). Byatt tells us that "an edition of 1819 has steel engravings, including 'Ducking a Witch,' which corresponds fairly closely to Maggie's description, and includes the figure of a fat, ugly, smiling man, arms akimbo, staring at the old woman in the pond."

6 *Jeremy Taylors Holy Living and Dying: The Rule and Exercise of Holy Living* (1650) and *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Dying* (1651), by the English divine Jeremy Taylor (1613–67), were popular and approved reading well into the nineteenth century.

7 *'Æsop's Fables':* probably in the famous and enduring translation of Sir Roger L'Estrange (1616–1704), *The Fables of Aesop and Other Eminent Mythologists* (1692); for the book "about kangaroos and things," see note to Chapter IV, p. 30, line 28.

8 *the seven-leagued boots:* see note to Chapter XI, p. 118.

9 De Senectute … *Fourth Book of the* Æneid: both Cicero's *Cato Maior de Senectute* and Virgil's *Aeneid* were standard school texts for boys of Riley's generation.

10 *the milk of human kindness:* proverbial, from *Macbeth*, i. v. 17–19: "Yet I do fear thy nature; / It is too full o' the milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way."

11 *mere blank:* the manuscript adds and deletes: "Moreover, we have yet to discover that Mr. Stelling was not a much more admirable tutor than Mr. Riley could have known him to be, and we may have to look at the auctioneer's error through the softening medium of desirable consequences. For anything that he appears at present Mr. Stelling may be the very man to rouse the dormant lingual powers of young Tom Tulliver, and fulfil his father's highest hopes by making him a match for Wakem."

Chapter IV. Tom Is Expected

1 *Jael destroying Sisera in the old Bible:* Sisera, captain of the routed Canaanite army, was killed by Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, thereby securing victory for the Israelites. See Judges 4:17–21: "Howbeit Sisera fled away on his feet to the tent of Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite …/ And Jael went out to met Sisera, and said unto him, Turn in, my lord, turn in to me; fear not. And when he had turned in unto her into the tent, she covered him with a mantle …/Then Jael … took a nail of the tent, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples, and fastened it into the ground: for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died."

2 *Pythoness:* witch, priestess, woman possessed by a spirit; the Pythoness was the priestess of the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, established after the god's victory over the serpent Python. See note to Book Sixth, Chapter IX, p. 464.

3 *auricula:* a species of primula, also known as "dusty-miller" because of the whitish powder found on its leaves; hence also the reference here to a "general mealiness."

4 *'Pug's Tour of Europe': Pug's Tour of Europe; or, The Travell'd Monkey: containing His wonderful adventures in the Principal Capitals of the Greatest Empires, Kingdoms and States* (1824), a picture book with verse commentary for each of the countries "visited."

5 *'Animated Nature': An History of the Earth and Animated Nature*, by Oliver Goldsmith (1730–74). First published in 1774, Goldsmith's book was popular well into the nineteenth century.

6 *nash:* variant of "nesh," meaning weak/fragile/delicate.

7 *the Prodigal Son … Sir Charles Grandison:* for the parable of the Prodigal Son, see Luke 15:11–32. Sir Charles Grandison is the eponymous paragon of gentlemanly virtue in the novel by Samuel Richardson (1689–1761), first published in 1754.

8 *the taste and strength of mind to dispense with a wig:* recalling a detail of Richardson's description of his hero: "The graceful youth of seventeen, with fine curling auburn locks waving upon his shoulders; delicate in complexion; intelligence sparkling in his fine free eyes; and good humour sweetening his lively features …" (Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, Vol. II, Letter 19).

9 *their feast of husks:* see Luke 15:14–16: "And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want./ And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. / And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him."

10 *no great shakes:* nothing extraordinary; no such mighty bargain/achievement, etc. *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable* suggests that the "reference is probably to gambling with dice."

Chapter V. Tom Comes Home

1 *physiognomy … the generic character of boyhood:* by the mid-1840s, the pseudosciences of physiognomy (judging character from the physical appearance of the face) and phrenology (the study of mental faculties supposed to be located in various parts of the skull, investigable by feeling the bumps on the outside of the head) had their proselytizers and detractors throughout the nineteenth century. George Eliot was an early advocate of phrenology, on friendly and—while editing the *Westminster Review* —business terms with its chief apostle, George Combe, succumbing at least twice in her life to phrenological examinations: in his journal, on August 29, 1851, Combe noted the following about the novelist: "She has a very large brain, the anterior lobe is remarkable for length, breadth, and height, the coronal region is large, the front rather predominating.… Love of approb, and Concentrativeness are large. Her temper is nervous lymphatic. She is rather tall, near 40 apparently [actually, she was thirty-one], pale, and in delicate health.… She shewed great analytic power and an instinctive soundness of judgement" (reprinted in Frederick Karl, *George Eliot: A Biography* [London: HarperCollins, 1995], p. 134). By the time Eliot was writing *The Mill on the Floss*, she had rejected the pseudoscience as overly deterministic.

2 *phiz:* face; colloquial abbreviation for “physiognomy.”

3 *cobnuts:* a children’s game that, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, “consists in pitching at a row of nuts piled up in heaps of four, three at the bottom and one at the top of each heap. All the nuts knocked down are the property of the pitcher. The nut used for pitching is called the ‘cob.’ ”

4 *Samson … a lion … you’d fight him:* see Judges 14:5–16: “Then went Samson down … and came to the vineyards of Timnath: and, behold, a young lion roared against him. / And the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him, and he rent him as he would have rent a kid, and he had nothing in his hand.…”

5 *Eagre:* a tidal wave of unusual height, caused by the rushing of the tide up a narrow estuary, used chiefly with reference to the rivers Humber, Trent, and Severn. A reference that facilitates the identification of St. Ogg’s with Gainsborough.

6 *Christiana passing “the river over which there is no bridge”:* in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the river stands before the gates to the Celestial City, the pilgrims’ final destination: “Now I further saw, that betwixt them and the gate was a river; but there was no bridge to go over, and the river was very deep. At the sight, therefore, of this river, the pilgrims were much stunned; but the men that went with them said, You must go through, or you cannot come at the gate” (Bunyan, p. 204). In Part II, Christiana discovers that “all the banks beyond the river were full of horses and chariots, which were come down from above to accompany her to the City gate. So she came forth, and entered the river, with a beckon of farewell to those that followed her to the river side. The last words that she was heard to say here were, I come, Lord, to be with thee, and bless thee” (pp. 400–1).

Chapter VI. The Aunts and Uncles Are Coming

1 *in cases of flight:* the manuscript adds and deletes: “Left to her own feminine resources, she had once, when she was smaller, hidden herself under a bed to avoid going home with Aunt Glegg, but the agony of shame she endured from being discovered in that absurd position and told that she was like the naughty tabby that they were obliged to hang because it went under the beds, made her ever after renounce the thought of hiding herself. Aunt Glegg was a bugbear, but ridicule was a greater bugbear; and to Maggie’s imagination every one at church the next Sunday knew that she had been found under the bed and smiled at her for that reason; for had not her mother told

her that all the little boys would point their fingers at her when she went out? Maggie's mind was not active in questioning premises, but only in drawing wide inferences, and she saw at once that if the little boys all knew, their fathers and mothers were likely to be informed."

2 *bandy:* a form of hockey.

3 *tipsy cake:* according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "a cake saturated with wine or spirit, stuck with almonds, and served with custard."

4 *brindled:* patched or streaked.

5 *it was all different:* the manuscript adds and deletes: "She sat down by the holly and made her little world just what she would like it to be: there was no such person as Bob Jakin, Tom never went to school, and liked no one to play with him but Maggie; they went out together somewhere every day, and carried either hot buttered cakes with them because it was baking day, or apple puffs well sugared; Tom was never angry with her if she forgot anything, and liked her to tell him tales; there were no bulls to run at her, or fierce dogs chained up and leaping out unexpectedly; her mother never wanted her hair to curl or to have her wear frills that pricked her, and the patch-work was mislaid somewhere, where it could never be found again; she had no aunts and only one uncle, a bachelor like Mary Tyler's uncle, who was always buying her books, so that she could always have something new to read and not have the trouble of fancying things out of her own head. Above all, Tom loved her—oh, so much,—more, even than she loved him, so that he would always want to have her with him and be afraid of vexing her; and he as well as everyone else, thought her very clever."

6 *"virtuein rags":* cf. John Dryden, 'The Twenty-Ninth Ode of the Third Book of Horace; Paraphrased in Pindarick Verse, and Inscribed to the Right Hon. Laurence Earl of Rochester" (1685), 86–87:

Content with poverty, my Soul I arm;

And vertue, tho' in rags, will keep me warm.

Perhaps significantly, given the complex network of allusions that Eliot weaves around Maggie, Tom, and the river, Dryden's translation and the Horatian original both have a central metaphor for the vagaries of fortune germane to the novel. Dryden's (50–64) reads:

Enjoy the present smiling hour;

And put it out of Fortunes pow'r:

The tide of bus'ness, like the running stream,
Is sometimes high, and sometimes low, A quiet ebb, or a tempestuous flow,
And always in extream.
Now with a noiseless gentle course
It keeps within the middle Bed;
Anon it lifts aloft the head,
And bears down all before it with impetuous force:
And trunks of Trees come rowling down,
Sheep and their Folds together drown:
Both House and Homested into Seas are borne;
And Rocks are from their old foundations torn
And woods, made thin with winds, their scatter'd honours mourn.

7 *hyperbole, or throwing beyond the mark:* hyperbole, the rhetorical term denoting exaggeration, derives from the Greek for "excess," which translates literally as "overthrowing."

8 *a Rhadamanthinepersonage:* in Greek mythology, Rhadamanthus, Aeacus, and Minos were the three judges of the Underworld; hence "Rhadamanthine"—inflexibly harsh or severe.

Chapter VII. Enter the Aunts and Uncles

1 *a* chevaux-de-frise: [Fr.; lit. "horses of Friesland"] according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "a defensive appliance of war, employed chiefly to check cavalry charges and stop breaches.... *Chevaux de Frise* are large joists, or pieces of timber, ten or twelve foot in length, with six sides into which are driven a great number of wooden pins about six feet long, crossing one another, and having their ends armed with iron points." So named because first employed by the Frisians in their struggles for freedom during the latter half of the seventeenth century to supply their want of cavalry.

2 *a gentleman farmer:* in other words, Mr. Pullet farms his own estate, rather than being a tenant-farmer (like Mr. Moss); consequently, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "a farmer who holds a better social position than the generality of his class."

3 *boluses:* medicines in a round shape for swallowing, larger than ordinary pills.

4 *leghorn:* according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "the name of a straw plaiting for hats and bonnets made from a particular kind of wheat, cut green and bleached, and so called because imported from Leghorn in Tuscany" ("Leghorn" = "Legorno," now replaced by "Livorno").

5 *an old Judy:* disparaging term for a woman of ridiculous appearance, from the character in the traditional Punch and Judy puppet show.

6 *Ajax among the slaughtered sheep:* in Sophocles' *Ajax* (307–11), the madness and blind rage of the eponymous hero lead him to mistake a flock of sheep for enemy troops, which he duly destroys. The Loeb translation reads:

> And as he scanned the havoc all around
> He smote his head and wailed and sank to earth
> A wreck among the wreck of slaughtered sheep
> Digging into his hair his clenched nails.

7 *that "half":* before the division of the school year into terms (c. 1865), the school year was divided into "half years."

8 *a burning glass:* a lens, or concave mirror, by which the rays of the sun may be concentrated on an object, so as to burn it if combustible.

9 *'When land is gone … most excellent':* cf. *Taste* (1752), I. i., by Samuel Foote (1720–77):

> For as the old saying is
> When house and land are gone and spent
> Then learning is most excellent.

10 *the Duke of Wellington … Catholic Question … his character:* Wellington had reluctantly become prime minister in 1828, and in 1829 he saw the Catholic Emancipation Act, ostensibly designed to bring into the electoral system the previously disenfranchised Irish, through Parliament. That this "had thrown such an entirely new light on his character" was due to the fact that the arch-conservative duke had been popularly perceived as—and, in fact, was—a defender of the status quo, and not the man to be sympathetic to any kind of electoral reform, particularly at a time when hostilities between Catholics and Protestants were running so high. Hence the disapproval expressed by Mr. Tulliver and his brothers-in-law was rife (to the extent that Wellington even fought a duel with one of his strongest critics, the Earl of Winchilsea, who claimed the duke was in league with the Antichrist). Not that

the reactionaries needed to have worried unduly: in tandem with the Emancipation Act was passed a bill that raised the property qualification for franchise from forty shillings to ten pounds, thereby effectively *dis*enfranchising the majority of Irish Catholics, and reducing the electorate in Ireland from 216,000 to 37,000.

11 *Blucher and the Prussians:* Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher (1742–1819), a Prussian field marshal who defeated the French at Leipzig in 1813, was defeated in turn at Ligny in 1815, but in the same year played a crucial role in securing Wellington's triumph at Waterloo.

Chapter VIII. Mr. Tulliver Shows His Weaker Side

1 *murrain*: cattle disease.

2 *"Markis o' Granby":* a once-popular inn sign. According to *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable*, "John Manners, Marquess of Granby (1721–70), commanded the Leicester Blues against the Pretender [i.e., Charles Edward Stuart, "Bonny Prince Charlie"] in the Forty-Five [i.e., the final Jacobite rebellion of 1745]; was a Lieutenant-General at Minden (1759), and commander-in-chief of the British army in 1766. He was a very bald man and this was exaggerated on most of the inn-signs."

3 *Alsatia:* a sanctuary, after the nickname for the Whitefriars district of London, which, according to *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable*, "retained privileges derived from being a converted sanctuary until 1697, and was the haunt of debtors and law-breakers.… [I]t was probably named after Alsace (Lat. *Alsatia)*, which was for centuries a disputed frontier and refuge of the disaffected." Given the number of references in *The Mill on the Floss* to the writings of Sir Walter Scott, the immediate reference here is probably to his novel *The Fortunes of Nigel* (1822), set partly in the Alsatia district.

4 *a machine-horse:* any horse employed to pull a vehicle; a post, stagecoach, or van horse.

5 *empty sacks 'ull never stand upright:* proverbial expression dating back to at least the mid-seventeenth century.

6 *thrums:* loose threads/fringes; technically, a thrum is the end of a weaver's thread.

Chapter IX. To Garum Firs

1 *Greek boys probably thought the same of Aristotle:* Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), whose many writings shaped Western thinking from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries, opened a school in the Lyceum at Athens in 335 B.C.

2 *Ulysses and Nausicaa:* in Book Six of Homer's *Odyssey*, the beautiful Nausicaa conducts the shipwrecked Odysseus (Ulysses) to the court of her father, Alcinous, after she and her handmaidens discover him naked on the beach.

3 *"Hush, ye pretty warbling choir":* from *Acis and Galatea*, by John Gay (adapted from Handel), first published in 1732.

4 *seven small demons:* see Mark 16:9: "Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils."

5 *Turkey rhubarb:* according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "the medicinal rootstock (purgative and subsequently astringent) of one or more species of Rheum grown in China and Tibet and for a long period imported into Europe through Russia and the Levant … usually (e.g. in pharmaceutical and domestic use) called Turkey or Russian rhubarb.…"

6 *pier-glass:* according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "a large tall mirror; orig. one fitted to fill up the pier or space between two windows, or over a chimney piece."

Chapter X. Maggie Behaves Worse Than She Expected

1 *a small Medusa with her snakes cropped:* in Greek mythology, the Gorgon killed by Perseus, with live snakes instead of hair, and whose eyes could turn people to stone.

2 *the young sultan:* for the Victorians, the sultans of the Ottoman Empire were bywords for all sorts of moral outrages. Here, the image of Tom as a "sultan" alludes either to his imperiousness, or to his, as it were, "polygamous" relationship with Maggie and Lucy.

3 *wanting to the action:* in Part 6 (para. 2) of Aristotle's *Poetics*, tragedy is defined as "a representation of an action that is worth serious attention, complete in itself, and *of some amplitude* [my italics]… presented in the form of action, not narration; by means of pity and fear bringing about the purgation of such emotions" *(Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. T. S. Dorsch [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965, 1988], pp. 38–39).

4 corpus delicti: [Lat.] “the body of the crime”; that which constitutes the essential facts of the crime charged.

5 *spud:* a type of narrow-bladed digging implement.

Chapter XI. Maggie Tries to Run Away from Her Shadow

1 *Apollyon:* in Part I of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian espies “a foul fiend coming over the field to meet him: his name is Apollyon” (Bunyan, p. 74). The monster “was hideous to behold: he was clothed with scales, like a fish (and they are his pride); he had wings like a dragon, feet like a bear, and out of his belly came fire and smoke; and his mouth was as the mouth of a lion” (p. 75). Christian eventually defeats him in battle.

2 *a highwayman:* unidentified.

3 *a blinking dwarf in yellow:* from the fairy story “Le Nain Jaune,” in *Contes nouveaux, ou les fées à la mode* (1698) by MarieCatherine Le Jumel de Barneville, Countess d’Aulnoy (1650–1705). As *Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase & Fable* tells it, ’[a] certain queen had a daughter named All-Fair, of incomparable beauty. One day the queen went to consult the Desert-Fairy, but, being weary, lay down to rest, and fell asleep. On waking she saw two lions approaching, and was greatly terrified. At this juncture the Yellow Dwarf arrested her attention, and promised to save her from the lions if she would consent to give him All-Fair for his bride. The queen made the promise, and an orange-tree opened, into which the queen entered, and escaped the lions. The queen now sickened, and All-Fair went to consult the Desert-Fairy, but, like her mother, was threatened by the lions, and promised to be the dwarf’s bride if he would contrive her escape. Next morning she awoke in her own room, and found on her finger a ring made of a single red hair, which could not be got off. The princess now sickened, and the States resolved to give her in marriage to the powerful king of the Gold Mines. On the day of espousals the Yellow Dwarf came to claim his bride, carried her off on his Spanish cat, and confined her in Steel Castle. In the meantime the Desert-Fairy made the king of the Gold Mines her captive. One day a mermaid appeared to the captive king, carried him to Steel Castle, and gave him a sword made of one entire diamond. Thus armed, the king went in, and was first encountered by four sphinxes, then by six dragons, then by twenty-four nymphs. All these he slew with the syren sword, and then came to the princess. Here he dropped his sword, which the Yellow Dwarf took possession of. The Yellow Dwarf now made the king his

captive, and asked if he would give up the princess. “No,” said the king; whereupon the dwarf stabbed him to the heart; and the princess, seeing him fall, threw herself upon the dead body and died also.”

4 *arms akimbo:* see note to Chapter III, p. 117.

5 *Catechism of Geography:* probably by William Pinnock, who produced a great many such educational “catechisms” for children in the 1820s and 1830s.

6 *Jack the Giantkiller* the hero of the old British nursery story which was first given by Walter Map (d. *c*. 1209), from a French source. Jack’s magic “seven-league boots” ensured that he could never be overtaken.

7 *Mr. Greatheart:* the steadfast companion of Christiana, in Part II of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

8 *St. George who slew the dragon:* the patron saint of England, since the reign of Edward III. The legend of St. George’s slaying of the dragon is simply one of many allegorical expressions, dating from the medieval period, of the triumph of the Christian hero over evil, deriving from Revelation 12:9 (“And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him”), and Psalms 91:13 (“Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet”).

9 *Leonore:* from the ballad by Gottfried August Bürger (1747–1794), in which the bride Lenore is taken on a long midnight ride by the ghost of her dead lover. There were many English translations in the late eighteenth century, including Sir Walter Scott’s first published work, *William and Helen* (1796).

Chapter XII. Mr. and Mrs. Glegg at Home

1 *well-crushed cheese … soft fleeces … the best classic pastorals:* such as Virgil’s *Eclogues*, Theocritus’s *Idylls*, and Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe*. Specifically, the reference to “well-crushed cheeses” may be recalling Virgil, *Eclogues*, I. 81, *pressi copia lactis* (Loeb: “a wealth of pressed cheeses”).

2 *bower-birds … white ants:* as described, says Haight, in Chapter 8 of W. J. Broderip’s *Leaves from the Note Book of a Naturalist* (1852). See note to Book Second, Chapter I, p. 146.

3 *“familiar with forgotten years”:* see Wordsworth, “The Excursion,” I, 275–9:

… some peak
Familiar with forgotten years, that shows
Inscribed upon its visionary sides,
The history of many a winter storm,
Or obscure records of the path of fire.

4 *the Saxon hero-king … youth … lovetime:* The narrator's brief history of St. Ogg's again facilitates its identification with Gainsborough. In A.D. 868, Alfred the Great (A.D. 849–99), king of Wessex, celebrated his wedding at Gainsborough, with Ealhswith, the daughter of a Mercian nobleman.

5 *the dreadful heathen Dane:* Sweyn I (c. 987–1014), king of Denmark. As James Ingram's 1823 translation of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* puts it: "And in the same year [1013], before the month August, came King Sweyne with his fleet to Sandwich; and very soon went about East-Anglia into the Humber-mouth, and so up-ward along the Trent, until he came to Gainsborough.… When he understood that all the people were subject to him, then ordered he that his army should have provision and horses; and he then went southward with his main army, committing his ships and the hostages to his son Knute. And after he came over Watling-street, they wrought the greatest mischief that any army could do. Then he went to Oxford; and the population soon submitted, and gave hostages; thence to Winchester, where they did the same. Thence went they eastward to London.… When he came to the city, the population would not submit; but held their ground in full fight against him, because therein was King Ethelred, and Thurkill with him. Then went King Sweyne thence to Wallingford; and so over Thames westward to Bath, where he abode with his army. Thither came Alderman Ethelmar, and all the western thanes with him, and all submitted to Sweyne, and gave hostages. When he had thus settled all, then went he northward to his ships; and all the population fully received him, and considered him full king."

6 *invisible avenger:* Gray reminds us of the old legend that "at the (former) hall [occupied by Sweyn], it is said, Edmund, king of East Anglia—martyred by the Danes in A.D. 946 [actually 969–70] for refusing to renounce Christianity—materialized before the terrified tyrant and stabbed him 'in the midst of his warriors.' Sweyn died slowly, and in excruciating agony."

7 *his tumulus on the hill:* Gray refers us to Thonock Hill, to the northeast of Gainsborough, which "was once thought to include a burial-place." (It is now thought

Sweyn is buried in Denmark.)

8 *that fine old hall:* reminiscent, in its architectural variety, of Gainsborough Old Hall. See, for instance, Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of England* (1831): "The Old Hall is a curious structure, forming three sides of a quadrangle, and occupying nearly half an acre of ground; it is in the ancient style of domestic architecture: part of it is said to have been built by John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, the western wing by a member of the Burgh family, about 1490, and the eastern one, about 1600, by a member of the family of Hickman, in whose possession it remains; it has been converted into small tenements or workshops, and the theatre."

9 *oriel:* a small room or recess with a polygonal window, built out from a wall.

10 *a glory:* an aureole: technically, a crown, or an increment to the ordinary blessedness of heaven gained by virgins and martyrs; figuratively, the gold or colored disc or ring around the head in a picture.

11 *civil wars … continual fighting-place:* Gainsborough was in the thick of the English Civil War. As Lewis's *Topographical Dictionary* puts it: "In the beginning of the war between Charles I and the parliament this town was placed by the king under the government of the Earl of Kingston, who, being taken prisoner and sent to Hull, was unfortunately shot by the royalists, by mistake, in crossing the Humber: it was taken by the parliamentarians, but shortly after retaken by the Marquis of Newcastle, who placed it under the protection of a new governor. In 1643, Cromwell, on his way to York, encountered a party of royalists near Gainsborough, when they were defeated, and their commander, General Cavendish, brother of the Marquis of Newcastle, and Colonel Markham, of Allerton, fell in the conflict. As evidence of the military contests which have taken place here, it may be mentioned, that in paving the streets many human bodies have been found, which appeared to have been promiscuously interred after battle."

12 *War and the rumour of war … minds of men:* referring to the Napoleonic Wars, which began with Napoleon's seizure of Malta in 1803, and ended with his defeat at Waterloo in 1815.

13 *Russia … linseed came from:* Russia had become one of Britain's allies in 1813, leading to the defeat of Napoléon in the Battle of the Nations at Leipzig, Germany.

14 *John Wesley:* John Wesley (1703–91), founder of Methodism, began preaching in the open air from the moment the pulpits of the established church were denied him, a

practice he continued for over fifty years.

15 *the burning of York Minster:* in 1829, the roof and choir stalls of York Minster were destroyed in an arson attack.

16 *out of a man's rib:* see Genesis 2:21–22: "And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; / And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man."

17 *Harpagons:* misers; Harpagon is the main character in Molière's *L'Avare* (1668).

18 *not as meek as Moses:* see Numbers 12:3: "Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth."

19 *Baxter's "Saints' Everlasting Rest":* Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest: or, a Treatise of the Blessed State of the Saints in their Enjoyment of God in Glory* (1649–50). Baxter's text was popular devotional reading well into the nineteenth century.

20 *weeper:* the long black crape veil of a widow.

21 *a "widow well left":* I assume this is a quotation; however, apart from its appearance in Eliot's own *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), "Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story," Chapter 1 ("Mrs. Higgins, who was an elderly widow, 'well left'…"), it has remained untraced.

Chapter XIII. Mr. Tulliver Further Entangles the Skein of Life

1 *Œ dipus … his deed was inflicted on him rather than committed by him:* Haight tells us that the manuscript here added and deleted the lines in Greek from Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 266–67. The Loeb translation reads: "For me you surely dread not, nor my deeds / Deeds of a man more sinned against than sinning."

BOOK SECOND. SCHOOL-TIME

CHAPTER I. TOM'S "FIRST HALF"

1 *"My name is Norval":* a popular quotation from *Douglas: A Tragedy* (1757) II. i. 42–45, by John Home (1722–1808):

> My name is Norval; on the Grampian hills
> My father feeds his flocks; a frugal swain,
> Whose constant cares were to increase his store,
> And keep his only son, myself, at home.

2 *the Collect:* according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "the prayer which varies with the day, week, or octave, said before the Epistle in the Mass or Eucharistic service, and in the Anglican Service also in Morning or Evening Prayer, called for distinction the *Collect of the day.*"

3 *percussion-caps:* according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "small copper cap[s] or cylinder[s] containing fulminating powder, exploded by the percussion of a hammer so as to fire the charge of a firearm."

4 *Massillon and Bourdaloue:* Jean-Baptiste Massillon (1663–1742), preacher and writer at the court of Louis XIV; Louis Bourdaloue (1632–1704), Jesuit preacher.

5 *edit a Greek play:* Mr. Stelling hopes to advance to the top of his chosen profession: it was a common (and pejorative) Victorian perception that one of the only prerequisites for being a bishop in the early decades of the nineteenth century (particularly during the ministries of Lord Liverpool, 1815–26) was sufficient expertise in classical scholarship. See, for instance, Disraeli's *Tancred* (1847), Book II, Chapter 4: "About five-and-twenty years ago, it began to be discerned that the time had gone by, at least in England, for bishoprics to serve as appanages for the younger sons of great families. The Arch-Mediocrity [Liverpool] who then governed this country … was impressed by the necessity of reconstructing the episcopal bench on principles of personal distinction and ability. But his notion of clerical capacity did not soar higher than a private tutor who had suckled a young noble into university honours; and his test of priestly celebrity was the decent editorship of a Greek play.

He sought for the successors of the apostles, for the stewards of the mysteries of Sinai and of Calvary, among third-rate hunters after syllables."

6 *"Swing" and incendiarism:* the "Swing riots" of 1830 were spontaneous protests by the agricultural workers of Kent and East Sussex against their dire employment conditions, largely taking the form of incendiary attacks on their employers' hayricks. "Captain Swing" was the imaginary figure supposedly responsible.

7 *monthly nurse:* according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "a sick-nurse who attends a woman lying in during the first month after her accouchement."

8 *Mr. Broderip's amiable beaver … Upper Canada:* Haight refers us again to Broderip's *Leaves from the Note Book of a Naturalist:* the opening pages detail his pet beaver, "Binny," building dams out of household objects.

9 *the Eton Grammar and Euclid:* the origins of the *Eton Latin Grammar*, the standard Latin textbook in schools for generations, can be traced back to the *Aeditio*, the Latin grammar written by the English theologian and founder of St. Paul's School, John Colet (1466–1519). Euclid, the Greek mathematician (third to second century B.C.), wrote the fundamental geometric treatise, the *Elements*, in thirteen volumes, the first English edition being published in the eighteenth century.

10 *the miller talked of "mapping" and "summing":* the central issues of Book Second of *The Mill on the Floss*—Tom's lack of aptitude for a classical education, Maggie's contrasting incipient facility for it, and the extent of its practical application—together constitute an early intervention into possibly the greatest cultural debate to rage in Britain during the 1860s. Stelling's syllabus, as was the norm, is modeled on the classical education of the great English public schools. As M. L. Clarke tells us, "[w]hile the endowed public schools and grammar schools were the main strongholds of the classics, there were in the early part of the nineteenth century a number of private schools which prepared for the university [i.e., Oxford or Cambridge] and gave a classical education on grammar-school lines" (M. L. Clarke, *Classical Education in Britain 1500–1900* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959], p. 82). However, the radical difference between Tulliver's hopes for the substance of Tom's education and Stelling's provision of a purely classical education reflects the differences between parental expectation and educational actuality that grew more and more apparent as the nineteenth century progressed. Apart from the public schools, there were some eight hundred grammar schools that were compelled under the terms of their endowment to provide a classical education for their pupils; such

provision became increasingly incompatible with both parents' wishes and society's needs (see Clarke, pp. 74–76, 85–88); *The Mill on the Floss* appeared just as the debate on the value of a classical education, and on the value (for the money) of a public school education came to a head with the appearance, in 1860–61, in Thackeray's new periodical, the *Cornhill Magazine*, of three articles by the journalist "Jacob Omnium" (Matthew J. Higgins) questioning, in no uncertain terms, the competence and motives of the staff at Eton College (M. J. Higgins, "Paterfamilias to the Editor of the *Cornhill Magazine," Cornhill Magazine*, May 1860, 608–15; "A Second Letter to the Editor of the *Cornhill Magazine," Cornhill Magazine*, December 1860, 641–49; "A Third Letter from Paterfamilias to the Editor of the *Cornhill Magazine," Cornhill Magazine*, March 1861, 257–69), observing acidly that the College's teachers are "never trained to teach at all; no government inspector ever reports on the educational merits or demerits of our old-established upper-class schools, which remain, for the most part, mere money speculations, in which the welfare and progress of the pupils are held altogether subservient to the pecuniary profits of the masters" (Higgins, "Paterfamilias…," p. 609). The controversy generated by Higgins's articles led directly to the government's establishing the Clarendon Commission in 1861, to investigate and report on the organization and the quality of the education in the English public school system; it also provided the impetus for a more general (but occasionally vituperative) debate on the virtues of a "liberal" education (that is, an education covering a broad spectrum of disciplines) over a classical education, a debate so widespread that, by 1868, Thomas Huxley could remark that "[y]ou cannot go anywhere without hearing a buzz of more or less confused and contradictory talk on this subject.… In fact, there is a chorus of voices, almost distressing in their harmony, raised in favour of the doctrine that education is the great panacea for human troubles, and that, if the country is not shortly to go to the dogs, everybody must be educated" (Thomas Huxley, "A Liberal Education: and Where to Find It" [An Address to the South London Working Men's College, delivered on January 4, 1868, and subsequently published in *Macmillan's Mazagine]*, reprinted in Huxley, *Lay Sermons, Addresses, and Reviews* [London: Macmillan and Co., 1877], pp. 27–53; p. 27). The main charge brought against unthinking provision of the classics was that they were, ultimately, *impractical:* they were not suited to the needs of nineteenth-century Britain; they encouraged, and possibly generated, snobbery and elitism (see note to p. 158); as a cultural form of expression they were indicative of the division that existed between the increasingly marginalized governing classes and the governed (see note to Book Second, Chapter III, p. 174). In addition, female writers

such as Eliot (both in this novel and the later *Middlemarch:* see note to Book Fourth, Chapter III, p. 306) and Harriet Martineau pointed out that the crude gender divide underlying access to the classics was indicative of an urgent need to address the school curriculum as it pertained to girls. For both writers, the fitness or otherwise of a classical education for women was merely part of a broader debate concerning issues of female empowerment (see note to p. 154). By the end of the decade, the certainty of the value of a grounding in the classics had been irreparably shaken; accordingly, Matthew Arnold's still-influential *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), the famous revision and republication in book form of his earlier essays "Culture and its Enemies" (1863) and "Anarchy and Authority" (1868), can be seen retrospectively as the death knell of the widespread prestige previously enjoyed by a classical education in Britain: "The disparagers of culture make its motive curiosity; sometimes, indeed, they make its motive mere exclusiveness and vanity. The culture which is supposed to plume itself on a smattering of Greek and Latin is a culture which is begotten by nothing so intellectual as curiosity; it is valued either out of sheer vanity and ignorance, or else as an engine of social and class distinction, separating its holder, like a badge or title, from other people who have not got it. No serious man would call this *culture*, or attach any value to it, as culture, at all" (Matthew Arnold, "Culture and its Enemies," *Cornhill Magazine*, July 1863, 36–53; p. 36).

11 *"the freshest modern":* see Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub: Written for the Universal Improvement of Mankind* (1704), Section V: "… I here think fit to lay hold on that great and honourable privilege of being the last writer. I claim an absolute authority in right, as the freshest modern, which gives me a despotic power over all authors before me."

12 *in speech without metaphor:* in his *Poetics* (trans. Dorsch, 22,5), Aristotle writes: "the most important thing to master is the use of metaphor. This is the one thing that cannot be learnt from anyone else, and it is the mark of great natural ability, for the ability to use metaphor well implies a perception of resemblances."

13 *the Delectus: Delectus Sententiarum et Historiarum ad Usum Tironum Accommodatus*, by T.W.C. Edwards, a widely used beginner's textbook for learning Latin.

14 *a* nodus *worthy of interference:* Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 191–92: "Nec deus intersit, nisi dignus vindice nodus / inciderit." The Loeb translation reads: "And let no god intervene unless a knot come worthy of such a deliverer…."

15 *calenture:* a fever or delirium occurring on board ship in hot climates.

16 *Girls never learn such things:* by the time of *The Mill on the Floss*'s publication, female knowledge of the classics was appreciably more widespread than it was during the time of the novel's setting; paradoxically, by the time the value of a classical education was coming under direct assault during the 1860s, some of its staunchest defenders were protofeminists like Eliot and Harriet Martineau, who saw in such an education access to what had hitherto been (largely) a male preserve: "it can hardly be doubted that the stir was beginning. One evidence of this is that some girls of the middle-class were allowed to learn Latin and Greek; and that some others who were not permitted desired it. It was not only a solitary young creature, here and there, like Mrs. Somerville [Mary Somerville (1780–1872), the Scottish scientific writer], who desired it for special reasons, but many on the general grounds which make it desirable. It must have been above sixty years since that little Mary, afterwards Mrs. Somerville, said something to Professor Playfair [John Playfair (1748–1819), professor of natural philosophy at Edinburgh University], after having bound him to secrecy. 'Did he think there was any harm in a girl learning Latin?' 'That,' he answered, 'depended on what it was for.' Mary gave her reason: she wanted to study Newton's *Principia*. The professor did not see how this could hurt her; it took only a few months to make her mistress of both the language and the book: and certainly nobody has ever thought her the worse for either. But fifty years ago other girls, less gifted than little Mary, were petitioning to be taught Latin. The various parents and guardians received the petition variously; but on the whole they were far less liberal than parents are now. 'What?' exclaimed the respectable and enlightened father, accustomed to lead in his own little social world. His timid young daughter trembled at the rebuking tone of his terrible 'What?' 'Please, father, I should like to learn Latin.' 'You learn Latin! What a fancy! How should you learn Latin? And why should you? A girl learn Latin!' 'But, father, Queen Elizabeth did, and Lady Jane Grey, and —' 'Just look here,' said the father to all in the room; 'here is a young lady who thinks herself the equal of Lady Jane Grey and Queen Elizabeth!' No girl learned Latin in that house; but there were houses in which they did; and if we come down to forty years ago, we shall find the practice far from uncommon. There were few women qualified to teach the dead languages; but out of that generation of pupils those ladies were to arise who have established Preparatory Schools for boys of such merit as to be considered some of the best schools in the country. Masters in our most eminent public schools have openly rejoiced over boys who have come to them from this or that Preparatory School, because the mistresses grounded the boys so well in

Latin and Greek grammar" (Harriet Martineau, "Middle-Class Education in England: Girls," *Cornhill Magazine*, November 1864, 549–68, p. 552).

17 *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire:* by Edward Gibbon. The first volume of this monumental work was published in 1776, the next two in 1781, and the last three in 1788.

18 *peccavi:* [Lat.] I have sinned.

19 *Eton Latin Grammar* (24th ed. 1850). "Death is common to all" (Edwards, p. 141), a tag that derives from Cicero's *De Senectute*, XIX, 68: "Sensi ego in optimo filio, tu in exspectatis ad amplissimam dignitatem fratribus, Scipio, mortem omni aetati esse communem." The Loeb translation reads: 'I in my noble son, you, Scipio, in your brothers, who had given promise of the highest distinction, have felt that death is the common heritage of every age."

20 *"endowed with* such *a disposition": tali ingenio praeditum* (Edwards, p. 142), originally from Terence's *Andria* (pp. 96–98);

> omnes omnia
> bona dicere et laudare fortunas meas,
> qui gnatum haberem tali ingenio praeditum.

The Loeb translation reads: "all the town heaped congratulations on me for my good fortune in having a son endowed with such a character."

21 *the "thick grove penetrable by no star": nulli penetrabilis astro lucus iners* (p. 141), originally from Statius's *Thebaid*, Book X (84–86):

> stat super occiduae nebulosa cubilia Noctis
> Aethiopasque alios, nulli penetrabilis astro, lucus iners…

The Loeb translation reads: "Beneath the cloud-wrapt chambers of western gloom and Aethiopia's other realm there stands a motionless grove, impenetrable by any star.…"

22 'Appellativa arborum': "the names of trees"; this, and the phrases that follow, are from the rules governing the gender of nouns (pp. 111–12).

23 mas: masculine.

24 Sunt etiam volucrum … Piscium: "Sunt etiam volucrum; veu passer, hirundo; ferarum; ut tigris, vulpes: et piscium; ut ostrea, cetus, dicta epicoena …": "There are also names of birds, such as the sparrow and the swallow; of wild animals, such as

tiger and fox; and of fishes, such as oyster and whale, which are said to be epicene …" Perhaps thematically significant for this part of the novel, epicene nouns take either gender.

25 "Mascula nomina in a": Masculine nouns ending in -a.

26 *the pitiable absurdity of a false quantity:* in Greek and Latin verse, the meter is determined by quantity, i.e., the length or shortness of individual vowel sounds; hence "a false quantity," an incorrect use of a long for a short vowel, or vice versa. Tom is already proving susceptible to one of the most widespread snobberies associated with a classical education to come under attack in the 1860s. As F. W. Farrar witheringly puts it, "I cannot pretend to share in the traditional horror of a false quantity. It is deplorable to hear a petty scholar triumphing with all the airs of conscious superiority over some great man who has substituted a long for a short or a short for a long. I cannot affect to think one atom the worse … of the Duke of Wellington's intellect because he turned round, when reading his Chancellor's address at Oxford, to whisper, 'I say is it Jacóbus or Jacöbus?' I was taught as a schoolboy that a false quantity makes a man ridiculous, and sticks to him for life.… Considering that our entire method of pronouncing Greek and Latin is radically wrong, I cannot pretend to regard a false quantity in some rare word as otherwise than an entirely venial error.… The death-knell of all such fastidious littleness will be the birth-peal of a nobler and manlier tone of thought" (F. W. Farrar, "On Greek and Latin Verse-Composition as a General Branch of Education," in Farrar [ed.], *Essays on a Liberal Education* [London: Macmillan 1868], pp. 205–40; pp. 221–22).

27 Nomen non crescens genittivo: Nouns not increasing in the genitive; Edwards, p. 112.

28 *only this particular astronomer*. "Astronomus exosus ad unam mulieres"; Edwards, p. 242.

29 *"I would not buy it for a farthing or a rotten nut":* "Teruncio seu vitiosa nuce non emerim"; Edwards, p. 234.

Chapter II. The Christmas Holidays

1 *"in unrecumbent sadness":* William Cowper, *The Task* (1785), Book V ("The Winter Morning Walk"), 27–29:

The cattle mourn in corners where the fence
Screens them, and seem half petrified to sleep
In unrecumbent sadness.

2 *seven children:* Haight points out there are initially eight Moss children.

Chapter III. The New Schoolfellow

1 *washboard:* skirting board.

2 *the* Propria quæ maribus: "Nomen: Propria quae maribus tribuuntur mascula dicas" ("Nouns: Proper names which are assigned to males, or the male kind"), one of a number of short essays appended by William Lily (?1468–1522) to his short Latin syntax, *Rudimenta Grammatices*, which he contributed to Colet's *Aeditio* (see note to Book Second, Chapter I, p. 146), and which survived partially into the *Eton Latin Grammar*.

3 *"All gentlemen learn the same things":* Philip and Tom's exchange touches on the issue of social status underpinning the 1860s debate on the value of a classical education. One of the few measurable criteria for defining the omnipresent Victorian ideal of the "gentleman" was evidence of exposure to a classical education. However, it was precisely this insistence on a classical education to the exclusion of all other forms of education—as a perceptible marker of gentlemanliness, constitutive of its appeal to upwardly mobile middle-class parents—that was inhibiting the successful development of British society and its citizens: for at least one commentator, Lord Houghton, there was a direct causal link between the classical education of "our governing classes" and the "self-satisfaction" of the "present English gentleman," who no longer had a place in an increasingly professionalized society, and whose smugness was to be condemned rather than lauded: "It is solely to a growing conviction of the necessity of larger and wiser instruction of our governing classes, if they are to remain our governors, that we must look as the source of any beneficial change. The first, and indeed the chief impediment to this result, is the extreme self-satisfaction with which not only our national pride, but the authority of our public institutions, regards the character of the present English gentleman. He is exhibited to us as an ideal of humanity which it is almost sinful to desire to improve or transcend; and it is, if not asserted, continually implied that if he in his youth were taught more or otherwise than he learns at present, some mysterious degradation would inevitably

ensue.… It is not pretended that he pursues, or even resumes, the study that has occupied a fourth of his probable existence:… it is admitted that he may become a landed proprietor without a notion of agriculture—a coal-owner without an inkling of geology—a sportsman without curiosity in natural history—a legislator without the elements of law: it is assumed that he may frequent foreign countries, without having acquired even a convenient intimacy with their language, and continually incur that ridicule which is especially disagreeable to his nature; and yet, in the face of all these admissions, every attempt to supply these deficiencies is regarded as little less than revolutionary" (Lord Houghton, "On the Present Social Results of a Classical Education," in Farrar [1868], pp. 368–447; pp. 378–79).

4 *"Speaker":* William Enfield, *The Speaker; or, miscellaneous pieces, selected from the best English writers* (1774), frequently reprinted until the middle of the nineteenth century.

5 *Greek … fought the Persians … tragedies:* referring to Aeschylus, the Greek playwright who saw active service against the Persians in the Battles of Marathon (490 B.C.), Artemisium, and Salamis (both 480 B.C.)

6 *Socrates … died a grand death:* Socrates, the Greek philosopher, was sentenced to death for heresy, and for corrupting youth. He took his own life by drinking hemlock.

7 *Polypheme … Ulysses … roar like a thousand bulls:* In Homer's *Odyssey*, Book X, 386–99. The Loeb translation reads: "Even so we took the fiery-pointed stake and whirled it around in his eye, and the blood flowed around the heated thing. And his eyelids wholly and his brows round about did the flame singe as the eyeball burned, and its roots crackled in the fire. And as when a smith dips a great axe or an adze in amid loud hissing to temper it—for there-from comes the strength of iron—even so did his eye hiss round the stake of olive-wood. Terribly then did he cry aloud, and the rock rang around; and we, seized with terror, shrank back, while he wrenched from his eye the stake, all befouled with blood, and flung it from him, wildly waving his arms."

8 *Richard Cœur-de-Lion and Saladin:* Philip's knowledge derives from Sir Walter Scott's *The Talisman* (1825), set during the period of the Crusades "at which the warlike character of Richard I, wild and generous, a pattern of chivalry, with all its extravagant virtues, and its no less absurd errors, was opposed to that of Saladin, in which the Christian and English monarch showed all the cruelty and violence of an Eastern sultan, and Saladin, on the other hand, displayed the deep policy and prudence of a European sovereign, whilst each contended which should excel the

other in the knightly qualities of bravery and generosity" (Scott, introduction to *The Talisman)*.

9 *William Wallace, and Robert Bruce, and James Douglas:* Philip's knowledge of the great Scots warriors is, again, probably derived from Scott. His *Tales of a Grandfather* (1828–30) is a history of Scotland up until the failure of the second Jacobite rebellion at Culloden, in 1746 (when, implicitly, "Scotland" as an independent entity came to an end).

Chapter IV. "the Young Idea"

1 *"The Young Idea":* James Thomson, *The Seasons* (1728), "Spring," 1152–56:

> Delightful task! to rear the tender thought,
> To teach the young idea how to shoot,
> To pour the fresh instruction o'er the mind,
> To breathe the enlivening spirit, and so to fix
> The generous purpose in the glowing breast.

2 *Hal of the Wynd:* in Scott's *The Fair Maid of Perth* (1828), one of the names given to the novel's hero, Harry Gow / Harry the Smith.

3 *Saladin … in an instant:* " 'Mark, then,' said Saladin; and tucking up the sleeve of his gown, showed his arm, thin indeed and spare, but which constant exercise had hardened into a mass consisting of nought but bone, brawn, and sinew. He unsheathed his scimitar, a curved and narrow blade, which glittered not like the swords of the Franks, but was, on the contrary, of a dull blue colour, marked with ten millions of meandering lines, which showed how anxiously the metal had been welded by the armourer. Wielding this weapon, apparently so inefficient when compared to that of Richard, the Soldan stood resting his weight upon his left foot, which was slightly advanced; he balanced himself a little, as if to steady his aim; then stepping at once forward, drew the scimitar across the cushion, applying the edge so dexterously, and with so little apparent effort, that the cushion seemed rather to fall asunder than to be divided by violence" (Scott, *The Talisman*, Chapter 25).

4 *Robert Bruce … Bannockburn:* Robert Bruce's attack on Sir Henry de Bohun at the Battle of Bannockburn (1314), as related by Scott: "But as he passed, King Robert rose up in his stirrups, and struck Sir Henry on the head with his battle-axe so terrible a blow, that it broke to pieces his iron helmet as if it had been a nutshell, and hurled

him from the saddle. He was dead before he reached the ground" (Scott, *Tales of a Grandfather* [1827], Vol. I, Ch. 10). See also Scott's earlier telling of the incident, in *The Lord of the Isles* (1815), Canto VI, 15, 21–32:

High in his stirrups stood the King,
And gave his battle-axe the swing.
Right on De Boune, the whiles he pass'd,
Fell that stern dint, the first, the last!
Such strength upon the blow was put,
The helmet crash'd like hazel-nut;
The axe-shaft, with its brazen clasp,
Was shiver'd to the gauntlet grasp.
Springs from the blow the startled horse,
Drops to the plain the lifeless corse;
First of that fatal field, how soon,
How sudden, fell the fierce De Boune!

5 *to the top of his bent:* see *Hamlet*, II. ii. 375: "They fool me to the top of my bent."

6 *an uninteresting form of art:* Mr. Goodrich's correlated preferences in style and subject matter indicate that he is clearly representative of his time: from the end of the eighteenth century into the 1830s, art in England was dominated by Romantic, or Romantically influenced, representations of the English landscape, with its rejection of "objective" depictions of nature. Rather, such artists as Joseph Turner (1775–1851) and John Constable (1776–1837), and the Norwich school of watercolorists led by John Crome (1768–1821), preferred to concentrate on the emotive effects of light on their subjects, and on the way the landscape (i.e., the "reality" of the landscape) was altered by the different seasons. One only has to contrast the idyllic tranquillity of Constable's "Flatford Mill" (1820) with the harsh economic (and, ultimately, natural) pressures on this novel's Dorlcote Mill, to appreciate the difference of perception involved, between the Romantic view of the former and the "realist" view of the latter.

7 *King's Lorton:* the manuscript adds and deletes: "Mr. Stelling calling on Mr. Goodrich with this view, saw some of the more striking products of that gentleman's pencil: he stared at them one after another with his wide grey eyes and concluded that they were 'the right sort of thing,' appealing to Mrs. Stelling who accompanied him. That lady painted flowers on a small scale and wrote coloured mottoes under them, so that

by reason of her accomplishment as well as her sex, she was necessarily a better judge of these trivialities than a gentleman and a scholar; and as she considered Mr. Goodrich's drawings very masterly, there was no ground for hesitation in an affair which Mr. Stelling considered quite extraneous to his office. So Tom became a pupil of Mr. Goodrich and learned etc."

8 *an animal … boring a hole through a rock:* the mollusk *Pholas dactylus*, indigenous to the Devon coast. Haight refers us to G. H. Lewes, *Sea-side Studies* (1853), pp. 81–83.

9 *Satires*, I, i, 70–79:

> Accipe nunc, victus tenuis quae quantaque secum
> adferat. imprimis valeas bene. nam variae res
> ut noceant homini credas, memor illius escae,
> quae simplex olim tibi sederit: at simul assis
> miscueris elixa, simul conchylia turdis,
> dulcia se in bilem vertent stomachoque tumultum lenta feret pituita. vides ut pallidus omnis
> cena desurgat dubia? quin corpus onustum
> hesternis vitiis animum quoque praegravat una
> atque adfigit humo divinae particulam aurae.

The Loeb translation reads: "Now learn what and how great are the blessings that simple living brings in its train. First of all, good health. For how harmful to a man a variety of dishes is, you may realize, if you recall that plain fare which agreed with you in other days. But as soon as you mix boiled and roast, shell-fish and thrushes, the sweet will turn to bile, and the thick phlegm will cause intestine feud. Do you see how pale rises each guest from his 'puzzle feast'? Nay more, clogged with yesterday's excess, the body drags down with itself the mind as well, and fastens to earth a fragment of the divine spirit." Haight points out that the incorrect *particulum*, for *particulam*, has survived from the manuscript of the novel through all subsequent editions.

10 *one of Theodore Hook's novels:* a joke at the expense of the upwardly mobile Stelling: Theodore Edward Hook (1788–1841) was a prolific and popular novelist, whose novels dealt largely with depicting the world of the wealthy and fashionable, and were often criticized for their superficiality and crass veneration of the upper classes.

11 *an old Peninsular soldier:* Napoléon's invasion of Portugal and Spain, and his installation of his brother Joseph on the Spanish throne, led to the Peninsular War

(1808–1814), ended by Napoléon's abdication after Wellington's invasion of southern France.

12 *the* Iliad: Homer's epic, of course, deals with the mighty war between the Greeks and the Trojans following the abduction of Helen of Troy.

13 *Bony … dead:* Napoléon Bonaparte died, imprisoned on St. Helena, in 1821.

14 *Talavera:* the success, in 1809, of the British troops in crossing the river Douro, and routing Marshal Soult's forces at Talavera, was decisive in driving the French out of Portugal and set the seal on the brilliant reputation of the Duke of Wellington (then still Sir Arthur Wellesley). The then prime minister, the Duke of Portland, promptly created Wellesley "Baron Douro and Viscount Wellington of Talavera."

15 *the siege of Badajos:* in 1812, the stalemate reached in the Peninsular War was broken when British troops finally stormed Badajoz, a preliminary to the more decisive victory at Salamanca later that year.

16 *General Wolfe:* General James Wolfe (1727–59), who secured Canada as a British colony after defeating the French at the Battle of Quebec (1759). He died in battle.

17 *when Semele urged her too ambitious request:* Semele was killed by thunderbolts after being tricked by Hera into asking Zeus, who had seduced her, to appear before her in his true shape.

18 *a tune of Arne's:* Thomas Augustine Arne (1710–78), English composer most famous for "Rule Britannia" (to words of James Thomson).

19 *creosote:* another reference that helps enable the dating of the action: creosote, obtained from the distillation of wood tar, and with powerful antiseptic properties, was discovered in 1832. The reference here is probably to the fact that, as Philip is successfully feigning toothache, he will be permitted to wash his face with a gentle application of eau-de-cologne, or something similar, instead of having to scrub with pungent carbolic soap (to which creosote was often added).

Chapter V. Maggie's Second Visit

1 *The ox … instrument of attack:* see Horace, *Satires*, II. i. 55: "mirum, / ut neque calce lupus quemquam neque dente petit bos." The Loeb translation reads: "How marvellous! no more so than that a wolf assails none with his heels, nor an ox with his teeth."

2 *paternosters:* repetitions of the Lord's Prayer [Lat. *Pater Noster*, "Our Father"], uttered during the telling of a rosary.

3 *a horse-shoe frown:* "[H]e bent on me a frown so portentous, that no one who has witnessed the look can forget it during the whole of his life. The furrows of the brow above the eyes became livid and almost black, and were bent into a semicircular, or rather elliptical form, above the junction of the eyebrows. I had heard such a look described in an old tale of *diablerie*, which it was my chance to be entertained with not long since; when this deep and gloomy contortion of the frontal muscles was not unaptly described, as forming the representation of a small horseshoe" (Sir Walter Scott, *Redgauntlet* [1824], Chapter 6).

4 *Bluebeard:* as *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable* puts it, the "murderous tyrant in Charles Perrault's *Contes du Temps* (1697). In this version Bluebeard goes on a journey, leaving his new wife the keys of his castle, but forbidding her to enter one room. Curiosity overcomes her and she opens the door to find the bodies of all Bluebeard's former wives. On his return he finds a blood spot on the key which tells him of his wife's disobedience. He is about to cut off her head when her two brothers rush in and kill him."

Chapter VI. A Love Scene

1 *a man … food:* Philoctetes, armor-bearer of Hercules, bequeathed the latter's poisonous arrows after his death. En route to Troy, to take part in the Trojan War, he was bitten in the foot by a water snake. The more common version of the Philoctetes myth relates that the Greeks abandoned him on the coast of Lemnos because his wound produced such an intolerable stench, rather than because his cries were unbearable. He stayed there for ten years, until an oracle declared that Troy could not be taken without the arrows of Hercules. Taken to Troy by Ulysses and Diomedes, his wound was cured by Aesculapius.

Chapter VII. The Golden Gates Are Passed

1 *the golden gates had been passed:* in *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Bunyan, p. 210), the golden gates lead to the Celestial City: "Now when they were come up to the gate, there was written over it in letters of gold,—

BLESSED ARE THEY THAT DO HIS COMMANDMENTS,
THAT THEY MAY HAVE RIGHT TO THE TREE OF LIFE, AND
MAY ENTER IN THROUGH THE GATES INTO THE CITY *(Rev. xxii. 14).”*

BOOK THIRD. THE DOWNFALL

Chapter I. What Had Happened at Home

1 *suretyship:* according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "responsibility or obligation undertaken by one person on behalf of another, as for payment of a debt, performance of some act, etc."

2 *a bill of sale:* according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "a written instrument effecting a transfer of personal property; *spec*. a document given as security for money borrowed, authorizing the lender to seize the property in case of the non-payment of the money by a specified time."

Chapter II. Mrs. Tulliver's Teraphim, or Household Gods

1 *Teraphim:* a biblical allusion to the robbing of Micah's idols by the Danites, which ironically foreshadows the appearance of the bailiffs at the mill. See Judges 18:14–21: "… Do ye know that there is in these houses an ephod [a linen surplice], and teraphim, and a graven image, and a molten image?… / And they turned thitherward, and came to the house of the young man the Levite, even unto the house of Micah, and saluted him. / And the six hundred men appointed with their weapons of war, which were of the children of Dan, stood by the entering of the gate.… / And these went into Micah's house, and fetched the carved image, the ephod, and the teraphim, and the molten image.… / So they turned and departed, and put the little ones and the cattle and the carriage before them."

2 *chany:* china; crockery.

Chapter III. The Family Council

1 *that handsome new gig:* Richard D. Altick tells us that the great Victorian sage Thomas Carlyle "was responsible for popularizing another phrase long current in the Victorian literary lexicon. During the sensational Thurtell murder trial in 1823, the London newspapers had reported testimony to the effect that the victim, Weare, 'always maintained an appearance of respectability and kept a gig.' Five years later, in the January 1828 issue of the *Quarterly Review*, a footnote appended to an article on New

South Wales converted the simple affirmation into a fictitious exchange between counsel and witness: ‘Q. What do you mean by “respectable”?’ ‘A. He always kept a gig.’ In its new form of a definition rather than a loose association, the idea of respectability consisting of nothing more than means to keep a gig tickled Carlyle’s sardonic sense of humor when he read it, and in the years to come he repeatedly invoked it, sometimes in the form of his coinage, *gigmanity*, as Carlylean shorthand for petit-bourgeois social pretension. (Modern readers, to whom horse-drawn vehicles are nothing more than curious historical artifacts, are likely to miss the full implications of ‘gig.’ Keeping a carriage had long been, and remained, an accepted sign of affluent gentility, requiring, in addition to the initial expense, horses to be fed and stabled and a coachman to drive them.… A gig, on the other hand, was at the time the lowliest and cheapest conveyance obtainable, and association with it robbed ‘respectability’ of whatever dignity it otherwise possessed.)” (Richard D. Altick, *The Presence of the Present: Topics of the Day in the Victorian Novel* [Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991], pp. 779–80.)

2 *Ethiopians … Homer calls them “blameless”:* see Homer, *Iliad*, I, 429. The Loeb translation reads: “… for Zeus went yesterday to Oceanus, to the blameless Ethiopians, for a feast.”

3 *to be cupped: The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “cupping” as: “the operation of drawing blood by scarifying the skin and applying a ‘cup’ or cupping-glass, the air in which is rarefied by heat or otherwise.”

Chapter V. Tom Applies His Knife to the Oyster

1 *Tom Applies His Knife to the Oyster:* Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, II. ii. 22–23:

Why, then the world’s mine oyster
Which I with sword will open.

2 *Themes:* school essays written on a given subject; exercises in translation.

3 *Hora Paulina … Blair’s Rhetoric:* William Paley, *Horae Paulinae; or the Truth of the Scripture History of St. Paul evinced by a comparison of the Epistles which bear his name, with the Acts of the Apostles and with one another* (1790); Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783).

4 *hair-powder:* at the outset of the Napoleonic wars, the British government, in an effort to raise revenue needed to fund its military operations, put a tax on the hair powder used to keep wigs in good order. This seemingly bizarre move was also designed to bolster recruitment to the army; it was hoped that, as the new legislation made serving officers exempt from the tax, "gentlemen" might thus be motivated to join the militia. Instead—perhaps unsurprisingly—the fashion for wearing wigs died out virtually overnight.

5 *usher:* a schoolmaster's assistant, whose duties included both hearing the boys' lessons and supervising them out of school hours. The comparative lowliness of the post ensured that it was often occupied, as Thomas Hughes puts it in *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), by "inferior men": "The object of all schools is not to ram Latin and Greek into boys, but to make them good English boys, good future citizens; and by far the most important part of that work must be done, or not done, out of school hours. To leave it, therefore, in the hands of inferior men, is just giving up the highest and hardest part of that work of education. Were I a private school-master, I should say, Let who will hear the boys their lessons, but let me live with them when they are at play and rest. The two ushers at Tom's first school were not gentlemen, and very poorly educated.… "(Hughes, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, Part I, Chapter 3).

6 nunc illas promite vires … *"now promise those men":* from Virgil's *Aeneid*, V, 191. A more accurate translation might read "now put forth that strength."

7 *Dominie Sampson … Lucy Bertram:* in Scott's *Guy Mannering* (1815), Abel Sampson is the uncouth tutor ("dominie") to the Bertram family. The specific reference is to Sampson's declaration in Chapter 15, "I understand book-keeping by double entry and the Italian method."

8 *come of it:* the manuscript adds and deletes: "A girl of no startling appearance, and who will never be a Sappho or a Madame Roland or anything else that the world takes wide note of, may still hold forces within her as the living plant-sed does, which will make a way for themselves, often in a shattering, violent manner." Sappho (c. 610–580 B.C.) was the lyric poet of ancient Greece, and the driving force behind a group of women sharing the same emotional and intellectual sensibilities; Madame Jeanne Roland (1754–93) was executed during the aftermath of the French Revolution. The names of both women became proverbial for female passion.

Chapter VI. Tending to Refute the Popular Prejudice Against the Present of a Pocket-knife

1 *"scrazing":* scratching.

2 *scratter:* scratcher.

3 *chitterlings:* a dish made from the small intestines of pigs or other animals.

4 *flat:* according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "a person who is easily taken in and is said to be 'only half sharp'; a duffer, simpleton."

Chapter VII. How a Hen Takes to Stratagem

1 *taxing-masters:* singularly defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary* as "an officer in a court of law who examines and allows or disallows items in a solicitor's bill of costs when disputed."

2 *Allocaturs:* certificates, issued by the relevant authority at the termination of an action, allowing costs.

3 *Mrs. Glegg:* as Haight points out, all editions read "Mrs. Glegg" here, although the context surely indicates that this is an error, "Mr. Glegg" being the intended reading.

4 *Hodge:* a variant of "Roger"; the stock name in English literature for rustics.

5 *spencer:* according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "a kind of close-fitting jacket or bodice commonly worn by women and children early in the nineteenth century."

6 *eidolon:* a phantom or apparition; a confusing reflection or reflected image.

7 *Yellow candidate … Blue editor:* the respective colors of the Whigs and Tories.

8 *a chiaroscuro parentage:* partly revealed and partly veiled. The term is here used figuratively, of course; more properly, it is an artistic term meaning the management of light and shade in a picture, or the effect of light and shade on a picture.

Chapter VIII. Daylight on the Wreck

1 *"moithering":* to moider/moither: to confuse/stupefy/overcome.

2 *"mushed":* crushed; worn out.

3 *Saturnalian time:* the Saturnalia, the festival of Saturn held in mid-December, was marked by an exchange between masters and slaves of their respective garb and roles.

4 *the Nemean lion:* referring to the first Labour of Hercules: as *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable* puts it, the lion "kept the people of the valley of Nemea in constant alarm. The first of the Twelve Labours of Hercules was to slay it; he could make no impression on the beast with his club, so he caught it in his arms and squeezed it to death. Hercules ever after wore the skin as a mantle."

BOOK FOURTH. THE VALLEY OF HUMILIATION

1 *The Valley of Humiliation:* in Part I of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the place where Christian fights Apollyon (see note to Book First, Chapter XI, p. 113); in Part II, however, Mr. Greatheart explains to Christiana that "We need not to be so afraid of this valley; for here is nothing to hurt us, unless we procure it to ourselves. 'Tis true, Christian did here meet with Apollyon, with whom he also had a sore combat: but that fray was the fruit of those slips that he got in his going down the hill; for they that get slips there, must look for combats here. And hence it is that this valley has got so hard a name. For the common people, when they hear that some frightful thing has befallen such a one in such a place, are of an opinion that that place is haunted with some foul fiend or evil spirit; when, alas! it is for the fruit of their doing that such things do befall them there" (Bunyan, p. 307).

Chapter I. A Variation of Protestantism Unknown to Bossuet

1 *Bossuet:* Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704), Bishop of Meaux (from 1681), *Histoire des variations des églises protestantes* (1688).

2 *feeble generations … a desolation:* see Genesis 7:22: "All in whose nostrils was the breath of life, of all that was in the dry land, died" [in the Great Flood]; and Jeremiah 51:42–43: "The sea is come upon Babylon: she is covered with the multitude of the waves thereof. / Her cities are a desolation, a dry land, and a wilderness."

3 *And that was a day of romance!:* a puzzling section of narrative; the narrator's general evocation of a romanticized medieval past is clear enough; however, if the subsequent reference to a picture is a specific allusion, it has eluded the novel's annotators, previous and present. Nonetheless, in the immediate context of the narrator's evocation of a landscape redolent of medieval romance, it is hard not to think of Sir Walter Scott's sustained attempt to realize the age of chivalry, his novel *Ivanhoe* (1809), as all the figures mentioned here by Eliot's narrator can—broadly speaking—be accounted for within the other's pages. (Moreover, even if the narrator is merely listing what a Victorian readership would recognize as generalized medieval stereotypes, it is more than likely that both Eliot's and her readers' broad cultural knowledge of the period would have derived from the hugely influential Scott.)

4 *robber-barons:* recalling the terms in which Scott, in *Ivanhoe*, describes his Norman villains, like the "formidable baron" Front-de-Boeuf: "a tall and strong man, whose life had been spent in public war or in private feuds and broils, and who had hesitated at no means of extending his feudal power, [Front-de-Boeuf] had features corresponding to his character, and which strongly expressed the fiercer and more malignant passions of the mind" (Chapter 22).

5 *the wandering minstrel:* the figure least easily referable to *Ivanhoe* and most indicative that Eliot's narrator is speaking in generic terms; even so, Scott's novel does feature, in its penultimate chapter, the wandering Scots minstrel Allan a Dale, "a brisk young fellow, dressed in a green cassock embroidered with gold, and having at his heels a stout lad bearing a harp upon his back, which betrayed his vocation" (Chapter 43).

6 *the soft-lipped princess:* recalling Scott's beautiful Saxon princess Rowena.

7 *the pious recluse:* in Scott's novel, Friar Tuck masquerades as the devout, reclusive Holy Clerk of Copmanhurst, residing at the decrepit chapel of St. Dunstan. See Chapter 16 *passim*.

8 *the timid Israelite:* cf. Isaac of York, the persecuted Jew of *Ivanhoe*, markedly characterized by his timidity: "[Isaac's] arms fell down to his sides, and his head drooped on his breast, his knees bent under his weight, every nerve and muscle of his frame seemed to collapse and lose its energy, and he… [was] like a man borne down on all sides by the pressure of some invisible force, which crushes him to the earth without the power of resistance" (Chapter 6).

9 *a time of colour … glancing steel … floating banners:* if the world of *Ivanhoe* is being evoked in this passage, it is worth noting that the first quarter of Scott's novel is given over to "colour," "glancing steel," and "floating banners" in its description of the grand tournament at Ashby-de-la-Zouch.

10 *fromenty:* hulled wheat boiled in milk, sometimes flavored with spices, eggs, rum, etc. Also "frumenty"/"furmety"/"furmity." (It is laced "furmity" that causes the drunken Michael Henchard to sell his wife at the opening of Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* [1886].)

11 *bitter herbs:* alluding to God's instructions to the Israelites for the preparation of the Passover feast. See Exodus 12:8: "And they shall eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread; and with bitter herbs they shall eat it."

12 *Pitt and high prices:* William Pitt (the younger, 1759–1806), prime minister from 1783–1801, and 1804–6; the Napoleonic wars pushed up the price of goods.

13 *nidus:* a nest or breeding place; a place where anything is originated, fostered, or harbored.

Chapter III. A Voice from the Past

1 *sawney:* fool; idiot.

2 *George the Fourth … depressed cranium:* the deeply unpopular Prince Regent was proclaimed king in 1820. Sally Shuttleworth, in the Routledge edition of the novel (1991), points out that the "depressed cranium" alluded to is a phrenological reference (see note to Book First, Chapter V, p. 33): "Phrenology measured the strength and potentiality of the various mental faculties by the elevation of the cranium. The 'depression' of George IV's cranium is therefore a clear signal of moral and intellectual deficiency."

3 *that difference between the man and the monkey:* Byatt refers us to Richard Owen, *On the Gorilla* (London: 1859), p. 9: "Man's perfect hand is one of his peculiar physical characters; that perfection is mainly due to the extreme differentiation of the first from the other four digits and its concomitant power of opposing them as a perfect thumb."

4 *the days of chivalry … Burke's grand dirge over them:* Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France: In a letter intended to have been sent to a gentleman in Paris* (1790). The "dirge" in question is a lament for the "age of chivalry," prompted by a reflection on the triumphant revolutionaries' treatment of Marie Antoinette: "But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever. Never, never more shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom. The unbought grace of life, the cheap defense of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise, is gone! It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honor which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil by losing all its grossness."

5 *Télémaque:* François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon (1651–1715), *Les Aventures de Télémaque* (1699). Fénelon was (from 1689) tutor to the Duc de Bourgogne, son of the Dauphin, and wrote *Télémaque* as an exercise in moral education for his pupil; the adventures of Telemachus, in search of his father Ulysses, encapsulate Fénelon's political ideas.

6 *had all died at Smithfield:* Maggie's knowledge on this point almost certainly derives from John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments of these latter perilous dayes, touching matters of the Church* (first English edition 1563), popularly known as Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. Foxe's partisanship, and the emphasis placed on the Protestant martyrs of the reign of Mary Stuart, ensure that the book is a huge and virulent anti-Catholic tract (referring as it does to "the persecutors of God's truth, commonly called papists"). The Smithfield martyrs were so called because they were burned at the stake at Smithfield Market.

7 *Delectus:* see note to Book Second, Chapter I, p. 149.

8 *Eutropius:* Flavius Eutropius was the author of a history of Rome, often abridged for use in schools; Byatt refers us to, for instance, John Stirling, *Eutropii historiae Romanae breviarum … for the use of schools* (10th ed., 1810).

9 *Aldrich's Logic:* Henry Aldrich, *Artis Logicae Compendium* (1691); translated as *The Rudiments of the Art of Logic*.

10 *a considerable step in masculine wisdom:* cf. Dorothea Brooke's motivations for learning the classics in *Middlemarch*, Book I, Chapter 7: "it was not entirely out of devotion to her future husband that she wished to know Latin and Greek. Those provinces of masculine knowledge seemed to her a standing-ground from which all truth could be seen more truly."

11 *"Beauties of the Spectator":* Joseph Addison, *The Beauties of the Spectators, Tatlers, and Guardians, connected and digested under alphabetical heads* (1763).

12 *"Rasselas":* Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (1759).

13 *"Economy of Human Life":* Robert Dodsley, *The Economy of Human Life* (1802).

14 *"Gregory's Letters":* Olinthus Gilbert Gregory, *Letters to a friend on the Evidences, Doctrines, and Duties of the Christian Religion* (1811).

15 *the "Christian Year":* John Keble, *The Christian Year: Thoughts in Verse for the Sundays and Holy Days Throughout the Year* (1827); an immensely popular volume of Christian

verse by one of the leading figures in the Oxford Movement.

16 *Imitation of Christ* (written between 1390 and 1440), the most widely read and reprinted of all Christian devotional works, is conventionally ascribed to Thomas à Kempis (c. 1379–1471). Book I gives "exhortations useful for spiritual living"; Book II seeks humankind's concern with the spiritual over the materialistic; Book III affirms the comfort that results from being centered in Christ; Book IV demonstrates how one's faith must be strengthened through the Eucharist, or Holy Communion. The long extracts that follow here have been adapted (or misremembered) by Eliot from the eighteenth-century translation by Bishop Challoner. Subsequent explanatory notes give both references and the original passages to which Eliot refers.

17 *Know that the love … in the world:* "Know that the love of thyself doth thee more hurt than any thing in the world" (Book III, Chapter 27).

18 *If thou seekest this or that … cross thee:* "If thou seek this or that, and wouldest be in such or such a place, the better to enjoy thine own profit and pleasure, thou shalt never be at quiet, nor free from anxiety; for in every instance somewhat will be found wanting, and in every place there will be some one to cross thee" (Book III, Chapter 27).

19 *Both above and below … an everlasting crown:* "Turn thee above, turn thee below, turn thee without, turn thee within, and in all these places thou shalt find the Cross; and everywhere of necessity thou must hold fast patience, if thou wilt have inward peace, and win an everlasting crown" (Book II, Chapter 12).

20 *If thou desire … peace and tranquillity:* "If thou desire to mount unto this height thou must begin like a man, and lay the axe to the root, that thou mayest pluck up and destroy the hidden inordinate inclination to self, and to all private and earthly good. By this fault, (that a man too inordinately loveth himself,) every thing almost is upheld, which ought from its roots to be overcome. If this evil be once vanquished and subdued, there will presently ensue great peace and tranquillity" (Book III, Chapter 53).

21 *It is but little … the cause thereof:* "It is but little which thou sufferest, in comparison of those who suffered things so many, who were so strongly tempted, so heavily afflicted, so many ways tried and exercised. Thou oughtest therefore to call to mind the more heavy sufferings of others, that so thou mayest the easier bear thy own very small troubles. And if they seem unto thee not very small, then beware lest thy impatience be the cause thereof "(Book III, Chapter 19).

22 *Blessed are those ears … teacheth inwardly:* "Blessed are the ears that catch the pulses of the Divine whisper, and give no heed to the whisperings of this world. Blessed indeed are those ears which listen not after the voice which is sounding without, but for the Truth teaching inwardly" (Book III, Chapter 1).

23 *Why dost thou … entangled and perish:* "Why dost thou here gaze about, since this is not the place of thy rest? In Heaven ought to be thy dwelling-place, and all earthly things are to be looked upon as it were by the way. All things are passing away, and thou together with them. Beware thou cleave not unto them, lest thou be caught and perish" (Book II, Chapter 1).

24 *If a man … nothing of self-love:* "If a man should give all his substance, yet is it nothing. And if he should practise great penance, still it is little. And if he should attain to all knowledge, still he is afar off. And if he should have great virtue, and very fervent devotion, yet there is much wanting to him; especially, one thing, which is for him most chiefly necessary. What is that? That, forsaking all, he forsake himself, and go forth wholly from himself, and retain nothing of self-love" (Book II, Chapter 11).

25 *I have often said … much inward peace:* "I have very often said unto thee, and now again I say the same: Forsake thyself, resign thyself, and thou shalt enjoy great inward peace" (Book III, Chapter 37).

26 *Then shall all … love shall die:* "Then shall fail all vain imaginations, evil perturbations, and superfluous cares. Then also immoderate fear shall depart, and inordinate love shall die" (Book III, Chapter 37).

27 *quietism:* as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* tells us, "a doctrine of Christian spirituality that, in general, holds that perfection consists in passivity (quiet) of the soul, in the suppression of human effort so that divine action may have full play.… To wish to act is an offense against God, who desires to do everything in man. Inactivity brings the soul back to its principle, the divine being, into which it is transformed. God, the sole reality, lives and reigns in the souls of those who have undergone this mystic death.… They should not be concerned about salvation, perfection, or anything else but must leave all to God. It is not necessary for them to perform the ordinary exercises of piety." Accordingly, Quietism was condemned as heretical by the Roman Catholic Church. The most controversial practitioner of this form of religious mysticism was François Fénelon (see note to Book Fourth, Chapter III, p. 305), following his appointment as Archbishop of Cambrai in 1695. Bossuet (see note to

Book Fourth, Chapter I, p. 289), despite his tolerance toward Protestantism and former patronage of Fénelon, was unrelentingly hostile to Quietism, penning the harsh *Instruction sur les états d'oraison* (1697; "Instructions on the Calling of Oration") and the *Relation sur le quiétisme* (1698; "Report on Quietism"). After much pamphleteering and intrigue, Bossuet eventually, in 1699, secured Fénelon's condemnation from Pope Innocent XII, and the archbishop was exiled to his diocese.

28 *Faraday:* Michael Faraday (1791–1867), English physicist, whose discovery of electromagnetic induction revealed the principle of the electric motor, the dynamo, and the transformer.

29 ekstasis: trance; frenzy.

BOOK FIFTH. WHEAT AND TARES

1 *Wheat and Tares:* see Matthew 13:24–30: “Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: / But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. / But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. / So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? / He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? / But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. / Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.”

Chapter I. In the Red Deeps

1 *a mysteriously divine child:* the painting is Raphael’s “Sistine Madonna,” studied at length by an admiring George Eliot at Dresden in 1858.

2 *‘The Pirate’: The Pirate* (1822), Sir Walter Scott’s hugely popular (in its day) novel, set principally in the Shetland Islands.

3 *Minna … Cleveland:* Maggie read as far as Chapter 22 of Scott’s novel, in which its heroine, Minna Troil, chooses an isolated stretch of coast to confront her lover, Captain Cleveland, with her discovery that he is the pirate of the novel’s title: “In one of the loneliest recesses of the coast where a deep indenture of the rocks gave the tide access to the cavern, or, as it is called, the *Helyer* of Swartaster, Minna Troil was walking with Captain Cleveland. They had probably chosen that walk, as being little liable to interruption from others; for, as the force of the tide rendered the place unfit either for fishing or sailing, so it was not the ordinary resort of walkers, on account of its being the supposed habitation of a Mermaid, a race which Norwegian superstition invests with magical as well as mischievous qualities. Here, therefore, Minna wandered with her lover.”

Chapter II. Aunt Glegg Learns the Breadth of Bob’s Thumb

1 *Hecuba … Hector, Tamer of horses:* Hecuba's grief for the death of her son Hector, the great Trojan warrior, occurs in Book 24 of the *Iliad* (the epithet "tamer of horses" for Hector is in the book's final line).

2 *bottoms:* ships; "bottom" (i.e., the part of the hull of a ship that is below the wales) stands synecdochically for the vessel itself.

3 *the Industrious Apprentice:* the first part of *Industry and Idleness* (1747), a series of twelve etchings by William Hogarth.

4 *shupercargo:* supercargo; a person in a ship superintending all commercial transactions on the voyage.

5 *Aaron or mouthpiece:* the brother of Moses; see Exodus 4:14–16: "… Is not Aaron the Levite thy brother? I know that he can speak well.… And thou shalt speak unto him, and put words in his mouth: and I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what ye shall do. / And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people: and he shall be, even he shall be to thee instead of a mouth, and thou shalt be to him instead of God."

6 *more in sorrow than in anger:* proverbial, from *Hamlet*, I. ii. 231: "A countenance more in sorrow than in anger."

7 *'sizes:* assizes, defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary* as "the sessions held periodically in each county of England, for the purpose of administering civil and criminal justice, by judges acting under certain special commissions."

8 *the Princess Victoree:* a marker that helps us keep track of the novel's chronology: we can locate this as 1836, prior to Victoria's accession.

Chapter III. The Wavering Balance

1 *Hamadryad:* a wood nymph that died with the tree in which she dwelt.

2 *"Love in her eyes sits playing":* from John Gay's *Acis and Galatea:*

Love in her eyes sits playing,
And sheds delicious death!
Love in her lips is straying,
And warbling in her breath!
Love on her breast sits panting,
And swells with soft desire!

No grace, no charm, is wanting,
To set the heart on fire.

3 *the Hunger Tower:* Canto 33 of Dante's *Inferno* recounts the story of Count Ugolino; betrayed by Archbishop Ruggieri, Ugolino was imprisoned together with his sons Gaddo and Uguiccione and his grandsons Nino and Anselm. They were kept in the tower of the Gualandi, in Pisa, for nine months; in March 1289, Ruggieri ordered the tower locked up and the keys thrown into the river. Ugolino and his family starved to death, hence the nickname acquired by the tower. Ugolino's story, as presented by Dante, carries within it a number of hints that Ugolino turned to cannibalism to stay alive in the tower, feeding on his own family; this may be what Eliot's narrator alludes to as "the temptations that avail the desperation of hunger."

Chapter IV. Another Love-scene

1 *Corinne, or Italy* (1807), in which the novel's hero, Lord Nelvil, loves both the dark and passionate Corinne and the fair but submissive Lucile. Corinne eventually dies of a broken heart.

2 *Muse:* in Greek mythology, there were nine Muses, each a symbol of a different branch of the arts. They were: Clio (history), Euterpe (lyric poetry), Thalia (comedy), Melpomene (tragedy), Terpsichore (dance), Polyhymnia (the sublime hymn), Urania (astronomy), and Calliope (epic poetry).

3 *the blond-haired young lady reading in the park:* In Book 16, Chapter 5 of *Corinne*, Lord Nelvil is determined to reject Lucile, and visits her mother, Lady Edgermond, with the express purpose of doing so: "When he reached Lady Edgermond's house … as the mistress of the establishment was not yet ready to receive him, he went for a stroll in the grounds. Through the foliage he saw, in the distance, a girl with a most elegant figure and with wonderfully beautiful fair hair barely contained under her hat. She was reading very attentively" (Madame de Stäel, *Corinne, or Italy*, trans. Sylvia Raphael [Oxford: World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1998], p. 306).

4 *Rebecca … Flora MacIvor … Minna:* the dark heroines of, respectively, *Ivanhoe, Waverley* (1814), and *The Pirate*. All three share qualities with Maggie: Rebecca has "lustrous … eyes whose brilliancy was shaded, and, as it were, mellowed, by the fringe of her long silken eyelashes, and which a minstrel would have compared to the evening star darting its rays through a bower of jessamine" (Chapter 28); Flora, too,

has a “keen black eye” conveying “gentle pensiveness,” is able to “feel the pleasure in the pursuit of music and poetry,” and, unlike her brother Fergus, is able to rise above petty tribal jealousies: “the zeal of loyalty burnt pure and unmixed with any selfish feeling” (Chapter 21); Minna is characterized by seriousness and intellectual inquisitiveness, and “if strangers sometimes conceived that these fine features were clouded by melancholy … they were soon satisfied, upon farther acquaintance, that the placid, mild quietude of her disposition, and the mental energy of a character which was but little interested in ordinary and trivial occurrences, was the real cause of her gravity….” In his “Author’s Introduction” to the Magnum Opus edition of *Ivanhoe* (1830), Scott answers complaints about the ultimate fate handed out to the dark Rebecca in terms that should perhaps be borne in mind when reading Maggie’s history: “The character of the fair Jewess found so much favour in the eyes of some fair readers, that the writer was censured, because, when arranging the fates of the characters of the drama, he had not assigned the hand of Wilfred to Rebecca, rather than the less interesting Rowena. But not to mention that the prejudices of the age rendered such an union almost impossible, the author may, in passing, observe, that he thinks a character of a highly virtuous and lofty stamp is degraded rather than exalted by an attempt to reward virtue with temporal prosperity. Such is not the recompense which Providence has deemed worthy of suffering merit, and it is a dangerous and fatal doctrine to teach young persons, the most common readers of romance, that rectitude of conduct and of principle are either naturally allied with, or adequately rewarded by, the gratification of our passions, or attainment of our wishes. In a word, if a virtuous and self-denied character is dismissed with temporal wealth, greatness, rank, or the indulgence of such a rashly-formed or ill-assorted passion as that of Rebecca for Ivanhoe, the reader will be apt to say, verily Virtue has had its reward. But a glance on the great picture of life will show that the duties of self-denial, and the sacrifice of passion to principle, are seldom thus remunerated; and that the internal consciousness of their high-minded discharge of duty, produces on their own reflections a more adequate recompense, in the form of that peace which the world cannot give or take away.”

5 *monomania:* a form of insanity which displays itself as irrational or lunatic responses/views/actions on one issue/subject only.

6 *woof:* woven fabric.

Chapter V. The Cloven Tree

1 *tasty:* in the sense of “displaying good taste.”

2 *fine feathers make fine birds:* the saying dates back at least as far as the early seventeenth century.

BOOK SIXTH. THE GREAT TEMPTATION

Chapter I. A Duet in Paradise

1 *"King Charles":* i.e., a spaniel of the black and tan variety brought into notice by King Charles II.

2 *attar of roses:* a very fragrant, volatile essential oil, from Bulgaria and elsewhere, obtained from the petals of the damask rose.

3 *Hercules … hopelessly:* Hercules became slave to Omphale, Queen of Lydia; the common classical depiction of his hands being bound up as he spins wool for the queen was a stock image of emasculation.

4 *ratafias:* biscuits heavily flavored with almonds.

5 *some exalted Beatrice:* the idealized love of Dante. As *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable* puts it, "Beatrice Portinari was only eight years old when Dante first saw her. The poet's love for her was pure as it was tender. Beatrice married a nobleman, Simone de' Bardi, in 1287 and she died in 1290 (under the age of twenty-four)…. Beatrice is celebrated and idealized in Dante's *Vita Nuova* and *Divina Commedia*. In the latter work … Beatrice … represents the wisdom of faith.…"

6 *Turpin:* Dick Turpin (?1705–39), the infamous highwayman of legend and fiction, was eventually hanged for horse stealing. The impressive ride home Stephen alludes to here, and which became part of the Turpin folklore, indicates he has been reading William Harrison Ainsworth's immensely popular historical novel *Rookwood* (1834), the fourth book of which describes in exhaustive detail Turpin's flight, on his horse Black Bess, from Kilburn to York: "Away, away!—the road is level, the path is clear. Press on, thou gallant steed, no obstacle is in thy way!—and lo! the moon breaks forth! Her silvery light is thrown over the woody landscape. Dark shadows are cast athwart the road, and the flying figures of thy rider and thyself are traced, like giant phantoms, in the dust! Away, away!…" (Ainsworth, *Rookwood*, Book Four, Chapter 6).

7 *Graceful Consort … The Creation:* the duet for Adam and Eve in Part III of Haydn's oratorio (1798), after which this chapter is named ironically, beginning with Adam's address to Eve:

Graceful consort! At thy side
Softly fly the golden hours
Ev'ry moment brings new rapture,
Ev'ry care is put to rest.

8 *I don't think it suits your voice:* Adam's part is written for tenor; Stephen, of course, is a bass.

9 '*And from obedience grows my pride and happiness':* Eve's part of the recitative that precedes the duet runs thus:

O thou, for whom I am!
My help, my shield, my all!
Thy will is law to me.
So God, our Lord, ordains.
And from obedience grows
My pride and happiness.

10 *rotten boroughs:* before the Reform Act of 1832, the huge shift in population from the country to the towns meant that a great many of the old rural constituency boundaries contained within them hardly any actual constituents (like the notorious Old Sarum in Wiltshire, which consisted of two fields, an earthwork, and a population of zero). Such a situation meant that seats in Parliament could be bought fairly easily, hence the boroughs' "rottenness."

11 *"With thee delight … incessant bliss":* from the "Allegro" of "Graceful Consort":

With thee is ev'ry joy enhanced.
With thee, delight is ever new.
With thee is life incessant bliss
Thine it whole shall be.

12 *Raphael's great song … 'heavy beasts':* "Now heav'n in all her glory shines," in Part II of *The Creation:*

Now heav'n in all her glory shines;
Earth smiles in all her rich attire.
The room of air with fowl is filled,

The water swelled by shoals of fish;
By heavy beasts the ground is trod.

But all the work was not complete;
There wanted yet that wondrous being That grateful should God's pow'r admire,
With heart and voice his goodness praise.

Chapter II. First Impressions

1 *Marie Antoinette:* Marie Antoinette (1755–93), the queen of France from 1774, who played a decisive part in discrediting the French monarchy before and during the French Revolution and was eventually beheaded for treason.

2 *spiced with Pinnock:* see note to Book First, Chapter XI, p. 116.

3 *Geoffrey Crayon… "Sketch Book":* Washington Irving, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819–20).

4 *'Begone, dull care!':* a popular seventeenth-century air, beginning;

Begone, dull Care! I prithee begone from me!
Begone, dull Care! thou and I shall never agree.

5 *tall candlesticks … early prayers every morning:* in other words, Stephen thinks some of Kenn's innovations since occupying the incumbency smack of Catholicism.

6 *Southey's "Life of Cowper":* Southey's biography of Cowper was included in his edition of the poet's work (1833–37).

7 *the Bridgewater Treatises:* a set of works trying to reconcile natural science and history with the precepts of Christian teaching. Following the death of Francis Henry, Earl of Bridgewater, in February 1829, there was provision in his will for eight thousand pounds to be left at the disposal of the president of the Royal Society, to provide for the writing, printing, and publication of treatises "On the Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God, as manifested in the Creation; illustrating such work by all reasonable arguments, as for instance the variety and formation of God's creatures in the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms; the effect of digestion, and thereby of conversion; the construction of the hand of man, and an infinite variety of other

arguments; as also by discoveries ancient and modern, in arts, sciences, and the whole extent of literature." Eight such treatises were commissioned.

8 *Buckland's Treatise:* William Buckland, *Geology and Mineralogy Considered with Reference to Natural Theology* (London: William Pickering, 1836); the sixth Bridgewater Treatise. The "wonderful geological story" that Buckland had to tell was threefold: "The first regards the inorganic Elements of the Mineral Kingdom, and the actual dispositions of the Materials of the Earth: many of these, although produced or modified by the agency of violent and disturbing forces, afford abundant proofs of wise and provident Intention, in their adaptations to the uses of the Vegetable and Animal Kingdoms, and especially to the condition of Man. The second relates to Theories which have been entertained respecting the Origin of the World; and the derivation of existing systems of organic Life, by an eternal succession, from preceding individuals of the same species; or by gradual transmutation of one species into another. I have endeavoured to show, that to all these Theories the phenomena of Geology are decidedly opposed. The third extends into the Organic Remains of a former World the same kind of investigation which Paley has pursued with so much success in his examination of the evidences of Design in the mechanical structure of the corporeal frame of Man, and of the inferior Animals which are placed with him on the present surface of the Earth [William Paley, *Natural Theology: or, Evidences of the existence and attributes of the deity, collected from the appearances of nature* (1802). See note to Book Third, Chapter V, p. 243]. The myriads of petrified Remains which are disclosed by the researches of Geology all tend to prove, that our Planet has been occupied in times preceding the Creation of the Human Race, by extinct species of Animals and Vegetables, made up, like living Organic Bodies, of 'Clusters of Contrivances,' which demonstrate the exercise of stupendous Intelligence and Power. They further show that these extinct forms of Organic Life were so closely allied, by Unity in the principles of their construction, to Classes, Orders, and Families, which make up the existing Animal and Vegetable Kingdoms, that they not only afford an argument of surpassing force, against the doctrines of the Atheist and the Polytheist; but supply a chain of connected evidence, amounting to demonstration, of the continuous Being, and of many of the highest Attributes of the One Living and True God" (Buckland, pp. vii-viii).

9 *many illustrations:* in fact, the entire second volume of Buckland's Treatise comprises illustrated plates.

10 *the 'Nut-brown Maid':* a long ballad about the testing of a woman's fidelity, from Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765):

> Here may ye see that women be
> In love meek, kind, and stable;
> Let never man reprove them than,
> Or call them variable;
> But rather pray God that we may
> To them be comfortable;
> Which sometime proveth such as He loveth,
> If they be charitable.
> For sith men would that women should
> Be meek to them each one;
> Much more ought they to God obey,
> And serve but Him alone (349–60).

According to *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable*, "Henry, Lord Clifford, first Earl of Cumberland, and Lady Margaret Percy, his wife, are the originals of this ballad. Lord Clifford had a miserly father and ill-natured step-mother, so he left home and became the head of a band of robbers. The ballad was written in 1502, and says that the 'Not-browne Mayd' was wooed and won by a knight who gave out that he was a banished man. After describing the hardships she would have to undergo if she married him, and finding her love true to the test, he revealed himself to be an earl's son, with large hereditary estates in Westmoreland."

11 *crazy Kate:* uncle Pullet is confusing the Nut-brown Maid with "craz'd" Kate, as described in Book I of William Cowper's *The Task* (1785), pp. 534–56. As is so often the case with Eliot's literary allusions in this novel, the link made here between Kate and Maggie introduces a tangential association with drowning:

> A serving maid was she, and fell in love
> With one who left her, went to sea, and died.
> Her fancy follow'd him through foaming waves
> To distant shores; and she would sit and weep
> At what a sailor suffers; fancy, too,
> Delusive most where warmest wishes are,

Would oft anticipate his glad return,
And dream of transports she was not to know (534–44).

Chapter III. Confidential Moments

1 *have no history:* Haight refers us to Thomas Carlyle's rendering of "Montesquieu's aphorism, 'Happy the People whose Annals are blank in History-Books' " (Carlyle, *Frederick the Great*, 16, 1).

2 *was adored once:* said by the failed lover, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, II. iii.

Chapter VI. Illustrating the Laws of Attraction

1 *"character is destiny":* Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenburg), *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1799–1801): "… Schicksal und Gemüt Namen eines Begriffs sind" ("Fate and character are but names of a single idea").

2 *Hamlet … his father-in-law:* the narrator's ironic comments about Hamlet reveal, beneath the flippancy, a typical mid-Victorian uncertainty about the essential nature of the self. On one hand, one sees here an implicit articulation of the Victorians' growing awareness that a sense of self was governed, and indeed created, by the social network of which it formed only one small part, and that, consequently, all external "truths" (character, moral values, etc.) were not so much immutable and eternal but created by social consensus (Maggie's disgrace at the end of the novel, for example, is not brought about by some intrinsic "flaw" in her character; rather it is engendered by the response of St. Ogg's to her actions; by framing and interpreting Maggie's behavior within a network of previously and mutually agreed-upon values, the town doesn't merely *comment* upon Maggie's "immorality," it actually brings it into existence). On the other hand, one sees a reluctance to relinquish the Romantic and individualist idea that somehow the sense of self is both intrinsic and autonomous of any social constraints (so that, in this instance, Hamlet would *probably* have been miserable in any circumstance), and that that which is quintessentially true is *not* any external, socially constructed reality, but one's *perceptions* of that reality. The ambiguity of the Victorians' response to these conflicting philosophies explains why the issue of *solitariness* touched such a raw nerve with them, discernible in the fact that the subject hardly features at all in Victorian fiction. (Loners such as

Scrooge or Eliot's own Silas Marner are inevitably rehabilitated at last into society.) Hamlet's insistence on the autonomy of his perceptions and emotional experiences was thus a source of frequent irritation to the Victorians, such irritation most often taking the form—as it does in this passage—of feeble jokes about his soliloquizing. Perhaps the most famous example in Victorian literature is Mr. Wopsle's disastrous performance as Hamlet in Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860–61), Chapter 31: "Whenever that undecided Prince had to ask a question or state a doubt, the public helped him out with it. As for example; on the question whether 'twas nobler in the mind to suffer, some roared yes, and some no, and some inclining to both opinions said 'toss up for it'; and quite a Debating Society arose. When he asked what should such fellows as he do crawling between earth and heaven, he was encouraged with loud cries of 'Hear, hear!' " The joke, of course, lies in the crowd's insistence on making Wopsle's Hamlet interact *socially*. See also, for example: Thackeray's *The History of Pendennis* (1848–50), Chapter 6, in which a visit to the theater to watch Shakespeare's play is merely a vehicle for the domestic concerns of the Pendennis entourage and an opportunity for the local regiment of Dragoons to ogle the beautiful actress Emily Costigan ("We have nothing to do with the play …"); Mr. Finch's unsuccessful reading of *Hamlet* in Wilkie Collins's *Poor Miss Finch* (1871–72), Chapter 23, where his listeners suffer "under the malady known … by bitter experience of Mr. Finch, as the Hamlet-Fidgets"; and W. S. Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* (1891), a burlesque in which the two courtiers' mission from Claudius is specifically to prevent Hamlet, by whatever means, from delivering any more soliloquies.

3 *Miss Sophia Western … "respect for the understandings of men":* Sophia is the heroine of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749). The quotation comes from Book 17, Chapter 3: "Indeed, she always showed the highest deference to the understandings of men; a quality absolutely essential to the making of a good wife."

4 *the 'Maid of Artois':* opera by M. W. Balfe (1836); another of Eliot's details that helps us keep track of the novel's chronology.

Chapter VII. Philip Re-enters

1 *'Masaniello':* the English title of Daniel Auber's *La Muette de Portici* (1828), a rather highly strung opera, which climactically features the mute heroine Fenella ("la muette" of the original title), distraught at the death of her brother Masaniello, hurling herself into the molten lava of Mount Vesuvius, which has conveniently

erupted. The “inspiring duet” for tenor and baritone that Stephen and Philip sing is the stirring Act II song for Masaniello and Pietro, in which they resolve to fight for their political freedom:

Mieux vaut mourir que rester misérable!
Pour un esclave est-il quelque danger!
Tombe le joug, qui nous accable,
Et sous nos coups périsse l’étranger!

(Natalia MacFarren’s mid-nineteenth century translation reads: “Twere best to die on the ramparts of danger, / Than live in chains an outcast and a slave! / Let us unite, cast of the stranger, / Strike, with one blow our country’s freedom save.”) Gray tells us that Lucy and Stephen’s familiarity with the duet “is an improbability. Not only was it omitted from the first performance in England of the opera, but until the ecstatically-received presentation in 1849 by the Royal Italian Opera of the full five acts, the work was predominantly and popularly performed as a balletic hybrid.… The duet itself does not appear to be included among the many published arrangements of pieces from the opera that would have been available to Lucy and Stephen: as a climactic, stirring declaration of mutuality and patriotic intent, it was no doubt suppressed as too inflammatory, since … a performance of the opera in Brussels in 1830 was held to have inspired the Belgian uprising against the Dutch.”

2 *Let us take the road’:* the highwaymen’s song from Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728), Act II, Scene 2.

3 *canterbury:* a cabinet designed to hold sheet music.

4 *the* Somnambula: Vincenzo Bellini, *La Sonnambula* (1831). Both Haight and Byatt point out that the name is misspelled “Somnambula” in the manuscript and all editions. Lucy’s finding the music “delicious,” leading Philip to “bring … out the tune more definitely,” reflects the nineteenth-century commonplace that, however rudimentary Bellini’s skills of setting and orchestration, his melodic skills were second to none. Eliot’s reference to the opera is probably allusive: the heroine of *La Sonnambula*, Amina, is falsely accused of an improper liaison with the count Rodolpho (a bass, like Stephen), even though she is engaged to be married to the wealthy peasant Elvino (a tenor, like Philip); the villagers owe their livelihood to the river that runs through their village, and live in constant fear of the waters receding; finally, Amina is the (adopted) daughter of the milleress Teresa, resides in the water

mill, and, at the opera's climax, literally sleepwalks her way through the twin dangers of being crushed by the mill's water-wheel and traversing the frail bridge across the river.

5 *'Ah! perchè non posso odiarti':* Elvino's Act II aria, in which he confesses to Amina that he is unable to renounce his love for her, despite his belief in her infidelity:

Ah! perchè non posso odiarti,
Infedel com'io vorrei!
Ah, del tutto ancor non sei
Cancellata dal mio cor.

(MacFarren's translation: "Why, ah why thus must I sorrow, / Why despairing still regret thee? / I would hate, I would forget thee, / But thy image haunts me yet.")

6 *that mediœval tenor or troubadour:* Byatt refers us to the story of the late-twelfth-century troubadour Guillem de Cabestany, "who loved Marguerite, or Soremonda, wife of Raymond of Chateau Roussillon. Raymond killed Guillem, tore his heart from his body, cooked it and served it on a dish to his wife."

7 *"Shall I wasting … a woman's fair?":* opening lines of George Wither's "Sonnet" (1722). The rest of the stanza continues:

Or make pale my cheeks with care
'Cause another's rosy are?
Be she fairer than the day
Or the flowery meads in May—
  If she think not well of me,
  What care I how fair she be?

8 *the music of "The Tempest":* music for Shakespeare's play, composed either by Henry Purcell (1695), John Weldon (1710), or Thomas Arne (1746).

Chapter IX. Charity in Full-dress

1 *anger … spurned beauty … celestial breasts:* referring to the Judgment of Paris: in classical mythology, Paris was asked to arbitrate over the beauty of the three goddesses Hera, Aphrodite, and Pallas Athene. Judging in favor of Aphrodite, Paris was rewarded by her with the love of Helen of Troy. However, he also earned the

enmity of the two rejected goddesses. Eliot's text recalls Virgil's *Aeneid*, I, 11; 25: "tantaene animis caelestibus irae?" (The Loeb translation reads: "Can resentment so fierce dwell in heavenly breasts?"); "manet alta mente repostum iudicium Paridis spretaeque injuria formae" (Loeb: "deep in her heart lie stored the judgement of Paris and her slighted beauty's wrong").

2 *the frosty Caucasus:* Shakespeare, *Richard II*, I. ii.:

O who can hold a fire in his hand
By thinking on the frosty Caucasus?

3 *"the giant Python":* in classical mythology, the celebrated serpent produced from the mud left on the earth after the deluge of Deucalion. It lived in the caves of Mount Parnassus, but was slain by Apollo, who founded the Pythian Games in commemoration of his victory.

4 *'The souls … plunged too low':* misquotation from Keble's *The Christian Year;* see No. 84 ("St. Philip and St. James"), stanzas 12–13:

Thus souls, by nature pitch'd too high,
By sufferings plung'd too low,
Meet in the Church's middle sky,
Half way 'twixt joy and woe,

To practise there the soothing lay
That sorrow best relieves:
Thankful for all God takes away,
Humbled by all He gives.

5 *cheval-glass:* a large mirror supported on a frame and able to swivel in it.

6 *one of Correggio's cherubs:* Antonio Correggio (c. 1494–1534), Italian artist. His two most respected works are the cupolas of Parma Cathedral, and S. Giovanni Evangelista (also in Parma).

Chapter X. The Spell Seems Broken

1 *half-stifling with glaring gas and hard flirtation:* prior to the invention, *c*. 1840, of the atmospheric burner, one of the disadvantages of gas lighting was its voracious consumption of oxygen.

2 *darkness mute, and light eloquent:* Haight refers us to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, I, 60; V, 28. p. 472, line 31, *woman's arm … headless trunk:* a reference to the Elgin Marbles, friezes brought to Britain in 1816, in rather dubious circumstances, by Lord Elgin, a former British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. They are now housed, despite the implacable opposition of the Greek government, in the British Museum.

3 *enchanted cup … dashed to the ground:* in Milton's *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634 (Comus)*, the god Comus tries to persuade the Lady to drink his magic potion, which will transform her face to that of a wild beast. He also tries to seduce her:

> But this will cure all straight, one sip of this
> Will bathe the drooping spirits in delight
> Beyond the bliss of dreams. Be wise, and taste.… (810–12)

The stage directions continue: "The Brothers rush in with swords drawn, wrest his glass out of his hand, and break it against the ground; his rout make sign of resistance but are all driven in."

Chapter XII. A Family Party

1 *limb:* according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "the edge of the disk of a heavenly body, esp. of the sun and moon."

2 *cockatrices … wolves … blandest intentions:* a cockatrice, as *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable* tells us, is "a fabulous and heraldic monster with the wings of a fowl, tail of a dragon, and head of a cock." The specific reference here is to Isaiah 11:6–8: 'The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. / And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. / And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den."

Chapter XIII. Borne Along by the Tide

1 *Borne Along by the Tide:* see "We Ask That We May Not Yield To Our Own Inordinate Desires," part of the injunctions for the "Third Petition of the Lord's Prayer," in the Catholic *Catechism:* 'The sensualist, whose every thought and care is absorbed in the transient things of this world, is estranged from the will of God. Borne along by the

tide of passion, he indulges his licentious appetites. In this gratification he places all his happiness, and considers that man happy who obtains whatever he desires. We, the contrary, beseech God in the language of the Apostle that we make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscence, but that His will be done."

2 *"The thirst … a drink divine":* from Ben Jonson's "To Celia" (1616):

Drink to me only with thine eyes,
  And I will pledge with mine;
Or leave a kiss but in the cup
  And I'll not look for wine.
The thirst that from the soul doth rise
  Doth ask a drink divine;
But might I of Jove's nectar sup,
  I would not change for thine.

3 *Lindum:* the Roman name for Lincoln, some twenty miles from Gainsborough.

BOOK SEVENTH. THE FINAL RESCUE

Chapter II. St. Ogg's Passes Judgment

1 *schismatics:* those Christians who broke faith with the Anglican Church and became nonconformists.

2 *casuists:* those who seek to apply moral principles to practical questions.

Chapter IV. Maggie and Lucy

1 *"a certain man" … by the wayside:* the parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:30–37: "And Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. / And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. / And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. / But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, / And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. / And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. / Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? / And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise."

2 *an apostle … likely to be:* Peter's denial of Christ; Luke 22:34–62.

Chapter V. The Last Conflict

1 *"I have received … upon me":* another quotation from the Challoner translation of Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ:* "O Lord Jesu, as Thou hast said and promised, so truly let it be, and let it be mine to win it. I have received the Cross, I have received it from Thy hand; I will bear it, and bear it even unto death, as Thou hast laid it upon me. 'Truly a good monk's life is the Cross, but it guides him to Heaven.'

We have now begun, it is not lawful to go back, neither must we leave it" *(Imitation of Christ*, Book III, Chapter 56, "That we Ought to Deny Ourselves and Imitate Christ by the Cross").

2 *alone in the darkness with God:* cf. Mr. Greatheart's speech at the end of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Part II: "This river has been a terror to many; yea, the thoughts of it also have often frightened me. But now methinks I stand easy; my foot is fixed upon that upon which the feet of the priests that bare the Ark of the Covenant stood, while Israel went over this Jordan (Joshua iii.17). The waters, indeed, are to the palate bitter, and to the stomach cold; yet the thoughts of what I am going to, and of the conduct that waits for me on the other side, doth lie as a glowing coal at my heart. I see myself now at the end of my journey; my toilsome days are ended. I am going now to see that head which was crowned with thorns, and that face that was spit upon, for me. I have formerly lived by hearsay and faith; but now I go where I shall live by sight, and shall be with Him in whose company I delight myself" (Bunyan, pp. 406–7).

3 *God has taken care of me, to bring me to you:* Richard D. Altick makes the interesting point that Maggie's rescue of Tom (however ultimately abortive) would have had wider cultural reverberations than the modern reader appreciates, and argues persuasively that it would have recalled for the original readership the story of Grace Darling, neatly summarized here by a Victorian commentator: "In September [1838], the steamer *Forfarshire*, on her voyage from Hull to Dundee, struck about four o'clock in the morning on one of the Fern Islands [off the Northumbrian coast]. The wreck was observed by the keeper of the North Sunderland lighthouse, but the storm was so violent that few would have dared to venture out. Grace Darling, however, braved the fury of the tempest; and this has since rendered her name famous amongst those of noble women. In the newspapers of the day, Darling [her father] gives a graphic account of the thrilling incident. He says he observed the wreck about five o'clock in the morning, two hours after the vessel had struck. From the thickness of the weather, he could not discover if there were any men on the vessel. Between seven and eight he perceived some, and asked his daughter, Grace Horseley Darling, to accompany him in a cobble boat, with a view to assist and save them. She at once consented. He was quite certain that he would not be able to get back to the lighthouse without the help of some men he saw on the Great Hawker rock, and his calculation of returning was founded on that assumption. He and his daughter, anticipating such help, left Mrs. Darling to attend to the lighthouse, and rowed their

little boat round by the southern sides of three intervening rocks to the spot where they saw the shipwrecked persons. This was about a mile or upwards, and the sea was all broken water. When the men on the rock saw a slender woman pulling the boat to their rescue, their joy was almost frantic. A newspaper writer, who saw the young woman, says he was 'much struck with the singular modesty of this courageous female' " (Cornelius Brown, *True Stories of the Reign of Queen Victoria* [London: Griffith, Farran, Okeden & Welsh, 1886], pp. 30–31). Following the rescue, Darling became what we would today term a media celebrity: as Altick puts it, "her deed was celebrated in songs and engravings, on the stage and in verse.… Grace's premature death four years later enhanced its sentimental luster" (Altick, p. 153). Accordingly, he continues, Grace's deed served as a prototype for heroic feminine virtue and bravery, and became the model for later fictional incidents. Aside from Maggie's rescue of Tom in *The Mill on the Floss*, Altick lists: Charles Reade's *Christie Johnson* (1853), in which the eponymous working-class heroine rescues her lover from drowning in the Firth of Forth, thereby demonstrating her fitness for marriage to him, despite differences in rank; Charles Kingsley's *Two Years Ago* (1857), in which Grace Harvey saves the doctor Tom Thurnall from a shipwreck off the Cornish coast; Reade's "The Bloomer," in *The Course of True Love Never Did Run Smooth* (1857), which features the American Caroline Courtney, clad in bloomers as opposed to cumbersome and absorbent skirts, rescuing her fiancé from a stream; and Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65), in which Lizzie Hexam, an experienced oarswoman, rescues her feckless lover Eugene Wrayburn from the Thames Weir (Altick, pp. 153–55).

Conclusion

1 *"In their death they were not divided":* from David's lament for Saul and Jonathan, 2 Samuel 1:23: "Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided: they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions."

Reading Group Guide

1. In the first scene in the novel, Maggie is set in opposition to her surroundings, her family, and the notion of what it means to be a Victorian woman. Examine the last four pages of the second chapter of Book First. How is this juxtaposition highlighted, and through what means? What role does the narrator's voice play in this introduction to our heroine?

2. Mrs. Tulliver is portrayed as a stagnant and passive woman. Examine her unraveling in Book Third, Chapter II, as her material possessions are taken away from her. What does this say about her identity and its relationship to the material things in her life? How does this relate back to the ideals about women presented in the beginning of the novel?

3. The contrast between fantasy and reality is a theme that permeates the entire novel. Examine the passage in Book Fourth, Chapter I, which contrasts the ruins of castles along the Rhine with the "angular skeletons of villages on the Rhone." How is reality portrayed here, and in contrast, what is its relationship with fantasy? Is one an escape from the other, or are they mere opposites? What does this passage suggest about the human need for fantasy? Is fantasy an escape, or is it portrayed as oppressive?

4. How does this contrast between reality and fantasy or nostalgia relate to Maggie? In Chapter III of the same section above, Maggie laments the lack of fantasy and nostalgia in her own life and her desire for the "secret of life" (the paragraph that begins with "Maggie's sense of loneliness …"). What answers does this passage offer to this question? Does Maggie accept them?

5. Compare Maggie and her dialogues with Philip to Maggie during her romance with Stephen. How does the change in her mirror the turn of events in the novel? How and why do the two men affect her in such different ways? Is it merely their own personalities affecting Maggie, or is it something more internal in Maggie that the two men merely bring out in her?

6. Examine Maggie's relationship with Lucy. The contrast between the two women is clear from the beginning of the novel. How does this contrast shift throughout the novel? How

does Maggie's opinion of Lucy change? How does the world that Maggie inhabits differ from Lucy's world?

7. Representations of "home" vary from chapter to chapter throughout the book. Compare and contrast the multiple allusions to "home" and "nurture" and how they affect the various characters. For example, consider the passage at the end of Chapter III in Book Fifth, where "desire" is juxtaposed with "home." What does "home" represent for Maggie, and how does her attitude toward it shift throughout the novel? (Consider the passage toward the end of the novel where Maggie exclaims, "I wish I could make myself a world outside it, as men do.")
8. Examine Maggie's relationship with Tom. What do their conversations throughout Book Fifth suggest about gender? How does her relationship with Tom affect Maggie and her outlook?
9. Consider the ending of the novel. Why do you suppose the last chapter is titled "Final Rescue" even though the novel ends with Maggie and Tom's tragic death? What does this suggest about the novel's purpose? Looking back, how does this ending justify or explain Maggie's journey throughout the novel?

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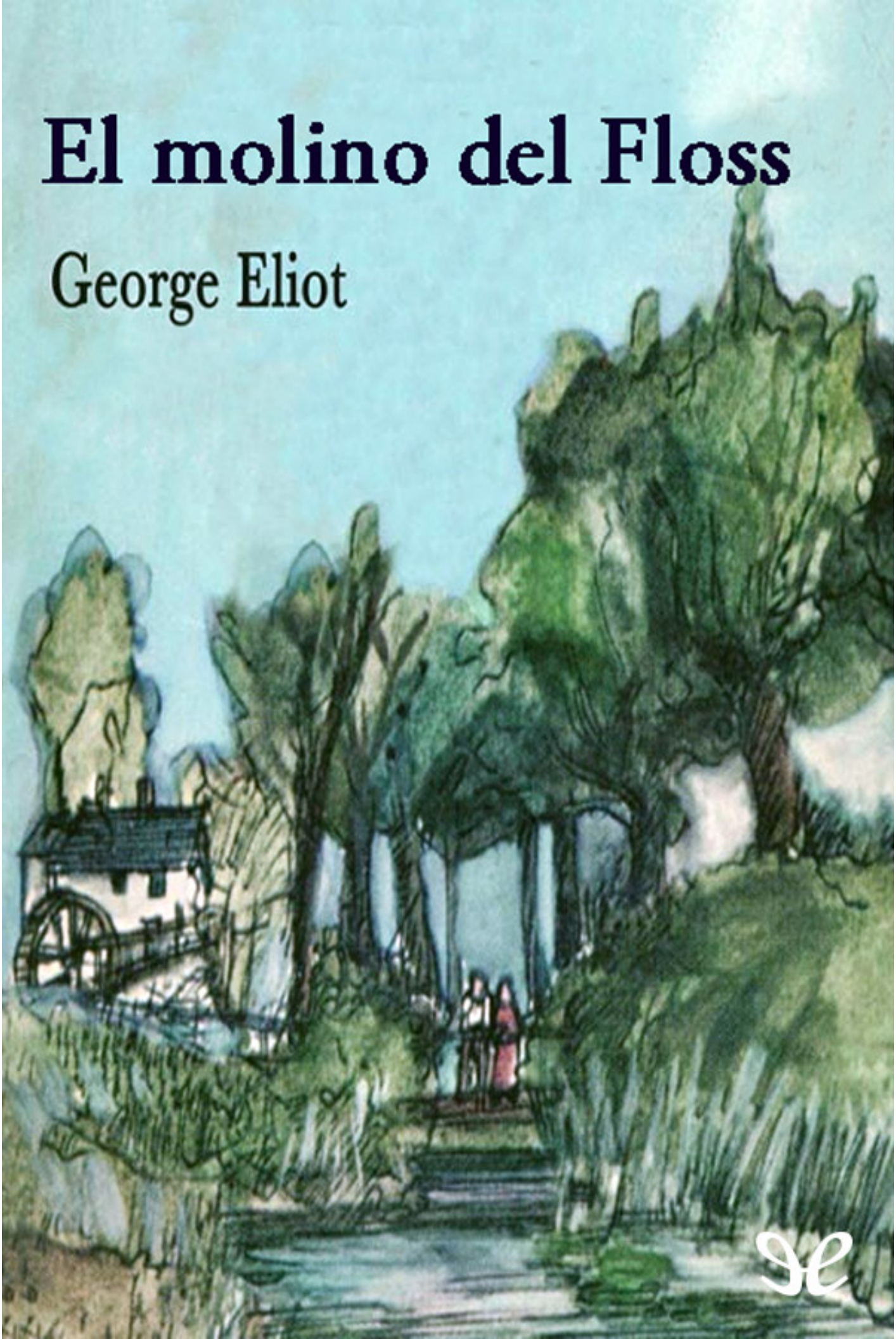
El molino del Floss

George Eliot



Inspirada en gran parte en los recuerdos de la infancia de la autora, El molino del Floss gira en torno al desigual destino de Tom y Maggie Tulliver, los hijos del molinero. A pesar de la inteligencia natural deMaggie, es Tom, por ser varón, quien recibe la educación y en quien el padre de ambos confía para hacer frente al futuro del molino. Cuando los niños se acercan a la juventud la desgracia económica cae sobrelos Tulliver, y los hermanos se ven obligados a enfrentarse a las dificultades.

Maggie, *alter ego* de Eliot, es uno de los personajes más fascinantes de toda su producción, una mujer sensible y apasionadaencerrada en un ambiente vulgar, monótono y, con frecuencia, ruín. A pesar del patetismo progresivo de la novela, un fino humor, altamente crítico, está siempre presente. Considerada, después de Middlemarch (1871-1872), la mejor obra de Eliot, El molino del Floss refleja aligual que ésta, a través de los conflictos morales de sus personajes, la preocupación metafísica de la autora…

George Eliot

El molino del Floss

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Nota al texto

El molino del Floss se publicó por primera vez en abril de 1860 en tres volúmenes y durante la vida de George Eliot se editó en otras tres ocasiones.

Aunque por lo general se ha considerado como texto definitivo el de la edición de 1861, el último revisado por Eliot, para esta edición se ha optado por la de A. S. Byatt, publicada en The Penguin English Library en 1979, basada en la primera edición original y en el manuscrito que se conserva en el British Museum. Byatt llevó a cabo una labor de reconstrucción a partir del manuscrito que Eliot entregó por primera vez al editor, el cual presionó para que la autora adaptara a las normas habituales su peculiar puntuación y el habla no estándar y dialectal de sus personajes, reflejo del modo de expresión de las gentes de las Midlands.

Este mismo deseo de fidelidad ha guiado la traducción, la primera en castellano que reproduce íntegramente el original (las anteriores censuraban algunas alusiones a la religión católica) e intenta reflejar en la medida de lo posible la diversidad de voces y grados de corrección de los hablantes, cuya cultura muchas veces queda por detrás de sus ambiciones sociales.

VOLUMEN I

Libro primero

El niño y la niña

Capítulo I

Los alrededores del molino de Dorlcote

El Floss se ensancha en una amplia llanura y entre riberas verdes se apresura hacia el mar, donde la amorosa marea corre a su encuentro y lo frena con un impetuoso abrazo. Esta poderosa corriente arrastra los barcos negros —cargados de aromáticas tablas de abeto, redondos sacos de semillas oleaginosas o del oscuro brillo del carbón— hacia la población de Saint Ogg's, que muestra sus viejos tejados rojos y acanalados y los amplios frontones de sus muelles, extendidos entre la baja colina boscosa y la orilla del río, y tiñe el agua con un suave matiz púrpura bajo los efímeros rayos del sol de febrero. A lo lejos, en ambas riberas se despliegan ricos pastos y franjas de tierra oscura, preparadas para la siembra de plantas latifoliadas o teñidas ya con las briznas del trigo sembrado en otoño. Del año anterior, quedan algunos vestigios de los dorados panales, amontonados aquí y allá tras los setos tachonados de árboles: los lejanos barcos parecen alzar los mástiles y tender las velas de color pardo hasta las ramas frondosas de los fresnos junto al pueblo de rojos tejados afluye en el Floss la viva corriente del Ripple. ¡Qué precioso es este riachuelo, con sus ondas oscuras y cambiantes! Mientras paseo por la orilla y escucho su voz queda y plácida, me parece un compañero vivo, como si fuera la voz de una persona sorda y querida. Recuerdo los grandes sauces sumergidos en el agua… y el puente de piedra…

Y ahí está el molino de Dorlcote. Debo detenerme un par de minutos en el puente para contemplarlo, aunque las nubes amenazan lluvia y cae la

tarde. Incluso en esta estación desnuda de finales de febrero, ofrece un aspecto agradable: tal vez la estación fría y húmeda añada encanto a esta casa cuidada y cómoda, tan vieja como los olmos y castaños que la protegen de los vientos del norte. Ahora el río baja lleno, cubre gran parte de la pequeña plantación de sauces y casi anega la franja herbosa del terreno situado ante la casa. Mientras contemplo el río crecido, la hierba de color intenso, el delicado y brillante polvo verdoso que suaviza el contorno de los grandes troncos que brillan bajo las ramas purpúreas y desnudas, soy consciente de que amo esta humedad y envidio a los patos blancos que sumergen profundamente la cabeza entre los sauces, indiferentes al extraño aspecto que ofrecen al mundo seco que se alza por encima de ellos.

El bullicio del agua y el bramido del molino producen una sutil sordera que parece acentuar la paz de la escena. Son como una gran cortina sonora que aísla del mundo. Y, de repente, se oye el retumbar del enorme carromato que vuelve a casa cargado con sacos de grano. El honrado carretero piensa en la cena, que a estas horas tardías estará resecándose en el horno; pero no la tocará hasta después de haber alimentado a los caballos, animales fuertes y sumisos de ojos mansos que, imagino, lo miran con suave reproche desde detrás de las anteojeras por haber restallado el látigo de un modo tan terrible, ¡como si les hiciera falta! Observa, lector, cómo tensan los lomos al subir la cuesta hacia el puente con redoblado esfuerzo porque están ya cerca de casa. Mira las hirsutas e imponentes patas que parecen asir la tierra firme, la fuerza paciente de las cervices, dobladas bajo las pesadas colleras, y los poderosos músculos de las combativas grupas. Me gustaría oírlos relinchar ante el alimento ganado con esfuerzo y verlos, con las cervices liberadas de los arreos, hundir los ansiosos ollares en el estanque embarrado. Ahora están en el puente, lo bajan con paso más rápido y el arco del toldo del carromato desaparece en un recodo tras los árboles.

Vuelvo de nuevo los ojos al molino y contemplo la rueda incesante que lanza diamantinos chorros de agua. Una niña también la está mirando: desde que yo me detuve en el puente, ha permanecido inmóvil junto al agua. Y aquel raro can blanco con una oreja castaña parece saltar y ladrar en una inútil protesta contra la rueda del molino; tal vez sienta celos de ésta porque su compañera de juegos, ataviada con una capotita de castor, está

tan absorta en su movimiento. Me parece que ya es hora de que la niña entre en la casa, dentro de la cual arde un fuego brillante que puede tentarla: desde el exterior se percibe un resplandor rojo bajo el cielo cada vez más gris. También ha llegado el momento de que me marche y alce los brazos de la fría piedra de este puente…

Ah, tengo los brazos entumecidos. He apoyado los codos en los brazos del sillón mientras soñaba que me encontraba en el puente, ante el molino de Dorlcote, y éste tenía el mismo aspecto que otra tarde de febrero, muchos años atrás. Antes de adormilarme, tenía intención de contarte, lector, la conversación que mantenían el señor y la señora Tulliver ante el brillante fuego del salón de la izquierda aquella tarde en que he estado soñando.

Capítulo II

El señor Tulliver del molino de Dorlcote manifiesta
su decisión con respecto a Tom

—Mira, lo que yo quiero —declaró el señor Tulliver—, lo que yo quiero es dar a Tom una buena educación: una educación que le permita ganarse el pan. En eso pensaba cuando avisé el día de la Virgen que dejaría la *'cademia*. El próximo trimestre quiero ponerlo en una buena escuela. Los dos años en la *'cademia* ya le bastarían si yo quisiera que fuera granjero o molinero, pues mayormente ya ha estudiado más de lo que yo estudié: mi padre no me pagó más enseñanza que la que se da con la vara por un lado y el alfabeto por otro. Pero me gustaría que Tom estudiara más para que no se le escapara ni uno solo de los trucos de esos individuos que hablan bien y escriben con florituras. Me ayudaría con los pleitos, arbitrajes y esas cosas. No quiero que sea abogado, pues sentiría que se convirtiera en un bribón, sino algo así como un ingeniero, un *inspetor*, un subastador o un tasador, como Riley o uno de esos hombres de negocios que no obtienen más que beneficios sin otro gasto que una gruesa cadena en el reloj y un taburete alto. Están todos muy cerca, los unos de los otros, e incluso se entienden bien con la ley, digo yo, porque Riley mira al abogado Wakem a la cara, de tú a tú, como un gato mira a otro. No le da ningún miedo.

El señor Tulliver hablaba con su esposa, una linda mujer rubia tocada con una cofia en forma de abanico. (Me asusta pensar en el tiempo transcurrido desde que se llevaron esas cofias: no tardarán mucho en volver.

En aquel momento, cuando la señora Tulliver frisaba los cuarenta, eran novedad en Saint Ogg's y se consideraban bonitas).

—Bien, Tulliver, tú sabes más que yo. No tengo nada que *ojetar*. A lo mejor podría matar un par de pollos e invitar a los tíos y tías a comer la semana que viene, para que oigas lo que mi hermana Glegg y mi hermana Pullet tienen que decir sobre esto. ¡Hay un par de pollos muy a punto!

—Puedes matar todas las gallinas del gallinero si quieres, Bessy; pero no preguntaré a ningún tío ni a ninguna tía lo que debo hacer con mi propio chico —contestó el señor Tulliver con aire de desafío.

—¡Por Dios! ¿Cómo puedes decir eso, Tulliver? —exclamó la señora Tulliver, sobresaltada ante aquella belicosa retórica—. Pero ya sé que hablas sin respeto de mi familia, y mi hermana Glegg *m'echa* a mí toda la culpa, aunque yo soy más inocente que una criatura recién nacida. Nadie me ha oído decir nunca que no fuera una suerte para mis hijos tener tíos y tías que no dependen de nadie para vivir. De todos modos, si Tom va a ir a un nuevo colegio, me gustaría poder ocuparme de lavarle la ropa y remendarla; si no, podría tener la ropa blanca de calicó, ya que antes de media docena de lavados estaría tan amarilla como la otra. Y así cuando vayan y vengan los paquetes, podré enviar al muchacho un pastel, o una empanada de cerdo o alguna manzana, porque no le vendrá mal algo, bendito sea, le den mucho o poco de comer. Mis hijos tienen para comer como el que más, gracias a Dios.

—Bueno, bueno, no lo enviaremos tan lejos que no llegue la carreta del recadero, si es posible —contestó el señor Tulliver—. Pero no pongas palos en la rueda por culpa del lavado si no encontramos un colegio cerca. Ese es el defecto que yo te veo, Bessy: encuentras una piedra en el camino y crees que no puedes seguir *alante*. No me dejarías contratar a un buen carretero si tuviera un lunar en la cara.

—¡Válgame el cielo! —exclamó la señora Tulliver, ligeramente sorprendida—. ¿Cuándo he puesto yo peros a nadie porque tuviera un lunar en la cara?, *t'aseguro* que me gustan los lunares, pues mi difunto hermano tenía uno en la frente. Pero no recuerdo que quisieras contratar un carretero con un lunar, Tulliver. Aquí estuvo John Gibbs, que tenía tantos lunares en la cara como tú y yo, e insistí en que lo contrataras; y así lo hiciste, y si no

se hubiera muerto de aquella inflamación, y bien que pagamos al doctor Turnbull para que lo atendiera, seguro que seguía llevando el carromato. Quizá tenía algún lunar donde no se viera, pero ¿cómo iba a saberlo yo, Tulliver?

—No, no, Bessy; no hablaba de lunares: era sólo un ejemplo que representaba cualquier cosa. Tanto da. Qué enredoso es entenderse hablando. Lo que ahora me preocupa es cómo encontrar la escuela adecuada para enviar a Tom, porque me podrían engañar otra vez, como con la *'cademia*. No quiero saber nada de una *'cademia* como ésa: la escuela a la que lo enviemos no será una *'cademia* Será un sitio donde los chicos dediquen el tiempo a algo distinto que limpiar los zapatos de la familia y arrancar las patatas. Es un problema nuevo y enredoso, éste de escoger un colegio.

El señor Tulliver permaneció en silencio un par de minutos y hundió las manos en los bolsillos del pantalón, como si esperara encontrar allí alguna sugerencia. Al parecer, no quedó defraudado, porque añadió:

—Ya sé lo que haré: hablaré de esto con Riley, ya que viene mañana para arbitrar en la cuestión de la presa.

—Bien, Tulliver; ya he sacado las sábanas para la mejor cama y Kezia las ha colgado delante del fuego. No son las mejores sábanas, pero son lo bastante buenas para que duerma cualquiera, sea quien sea; las mejores sábanas son *d'*holanda y me arrepentiría *d'*haberlas comprado si no fueran a servirnos de mortaja. Y si te murieras mañana, Tulliver, como están bien planchadas y preparadas, y huelen a lavanda, daría gusto usarlas. Las guardo en el rincón de la izquierda del gran arcón de roble, en la parte *d'*atrás: nunca me pasaría por la cabeza dejar que las tocara nadie más que yo.

Mientras pronunciaba esta última frase, la señora Tulliver sacó un brillante manojo de llaves del bolsillo, escogió una y la frotó entre el pulgar y el índice con una sonrisa plácida, sin dejar de contemplar las brasas ardientes de la chimenea. Si el señor Tulliver hubiera sido un hombre susceptible en sus relaciones conyugales, podría haber supuesto que extraía la llave para ayudarse a imaginar el momento en que él se encontrara en estado tal que hiciera necesario ir a buscar las mejores sábanas de holanda.

Por fortuna, ése no era el caso: sólo era susceptible en lo relacionado con su derecho a utilizar la fuerza motriz del agua; además, tenía la marital costumbre de no escuchar con demasiada atención y, desde que había mencionado al señor Riley, parecía ocupado en el examen manual de sus medias de lana.

—Me parece que he dado en el blanco, Bessy —señaló el señor Tulliver tras un breve silencio—. Seguro que Riley es quien mejor sabrá *d'*algún colegio: él fue a uno y va a todas partes arbitrando, valorando y todo eso. Y mañana por la noche, después del trabajo, tendremos tiempo para hablar *d'*ello. Mira, quiero que Tom sea un hombre como Riley: sabe hablar como si lo tuviera todo escrito y conoce muchas palabras que significan poca cosa y comprometen poco ante la ley. Y conoce bien los negocios.

—Bueno —dijo la señora Tulliver—, si se trata de hablar *corretamente*, saberlo todo, caminar con la espalda encorvada y el cabello para arriba, no me importa que se lo enseñen. Pero casi todos esos hombres de las ciudades que tan bien hablan llevan postiza la parte *dalante* de la camisa; se ponen las chorreras hasta que están hechas una pena y entonces las tapan con un plastrón; sé que Riley lo hace. Y, además, si Tom se va a vivir a Mudport, como Riley, tendrá una casa con una cocina tan pequeña que ni podrá darse la vuelta, nunca tomará huevos frescos para desayunar, dormirá en el tercer piso, si no el cuarto, y si hay un incendio, se quemará ahí arriba antes de poder bajar.

—No, no —replicó el señor Tulliver—. No pienso que se vaya a Mudport: quiero que trabaje en Saint Ogg's, cerca de nosotros, y viva en casa. Pero —prosiguió tras una pausa— lo que temo es que Tom no tenga cabeza para ser un hombre brillante; me parece que es un poco torpe: ha salido a tu familia, Bessy.

—Sí, es verdad —contestó la señora Tulliver, interpretando esta última afirmación en sus aspectos positivos—. Parece mentira cuánta sal le gusta ponerse en el caldo. Así era mi hermano y así fue mi padre antes que él.

—Pero es una pena —insistió el señor Tulliver— que sea el chico quien haya salido a la familia materna y no la mocita. Eso es lo que tienen los cruces de razas: nunca se sabe lo que va a pasar. La nena ha salido a mi familia: es dos veces más despabilada que Tom. Me temo que es demasiado

despabilada para ser mujer —prosiguió el señor Tulliver moviendo la cabeza primero a un lado y luego a otro en gesto de recelo—. No fastidia mientras es pequeña, pero una mujer demasiado lista es como una oveja con el rabo largo: no por eso vale más.

—Pues a mí sí que me parece un fastidio mientras es pequeña, Tulliver, porque le sirve para hacer travesuras. No consigo que conserve el delantal limpio durante dos horas seguidas. Y ahora que me lo recuerdas —añadió la señora Tulliver, levantándose y encaminándose hacia la ventana—, no sé donde se ha metido y casi es la hora del té. Ah, ya me lo parecía, está allí vagando arriba y abajo, junto al agua, como un animalito: un día de estos se caerá.

La señora Tulliver repiqueteó en la ventana, hizo un gesto con la mano y movió la cabeza de un lado a otro; antes de regresar a la butaca donde estaba sentada repitió varias veces el proceso.

—Tú dices que es lista, Tulliver —comentó al sentarse—, pero yo estoy convencida de que esta niña es medio boba para algunas cosas, porque si la envío al piso *d'*arriba a buscar algo, se *l'*olvida para qué ha subido y es capaz de quedarse sentada en el suelo, al sol, peinándose y canturreando como si fuera una débil mental de Bedlam, mientras yo *l'*espero aquí abajo. Eso nunca ha pasado en mi familia, gracias a Dios; ni tampoco nadie tiene esa piel tan morena que hace que parezca una mulata. No quiero reprochar nada a la Providencia, pero me da pena tener sólo una niña y que sea tan rara.

—¡Bah, tonterías! —dijo el señor Tulliver—. Es una niña normal de ojos negros, como puede ver cualquiera. No sé en qué es peor que los hijos de otros; y lee tan bien como el párroco.

—Pero, haga lo que haga, no se le riza el pelo, y se pone como loca cuando le coloco los papillotes, y peor aún es intentar que se quede quieta para las tenacillas.

—Córtaselo. Déjaselo bien corto —contestó el padre precipitadamente.

—¿Cómo puedes decir eso, Tulliver? Es una chica demasiado mayor para llevar el pelo corto, casi tiene nueve años, y es alta para su edad. Su prima Lucy tiene la cabeza llena de tirabuzones y no lleva ni un pelo fuera de sitio. No entiendo que mi hermana Deane tenga una hija tan bonita;

estoy segura de que Lucy se parece más a mí que mi propia hija. Maggie, Maggie —añadió la madre, con un tono entre irritado y persuasivo cuando aquel pequeño error de la naturaleza entró en la habitación—. ¿Para qué sirve que te diga que no *t'*acerques al agua? Un día te caerás y *t'*ahogarás, y entonces lamentarás no haber hecho caso a tu madre.

Maggie se quitó la capota y confirmó dolorosamente la acusación de su madre: la señora Tulliver, deseosa de que su hija tuviera el cabello rizado «como las hijas de los demá», se lo había cortado tanto por delante que la niña no podía sujetárselo tras las orejas; y, como al cabo de una hora de que le quitaran los papillotes tenía el pelo completamente lacio, Maggie movía la cabeza una y otra vez para apartar los pesados mechones oscuros de sus brillante ojos negros, gesto que le hacía parecer un pequeño poni de Shetland.

—¡Pero Maggie! ¿Cómo se *t'*ocurre tirar así el gorrito? Sé buena chica y súbelo, péinate, ponte el otro delantal y cámbiate de zapatos. Vamos, ¿no te da vergüenza? Y baja con tu labor de retales, como una señorita.

—Madre —declaró Maggie con irritación vehemente—. No quiero hacer la labor.

—¡Vaya! ¿No quieres coser un cubrecama para la tía Glegg?

—Es de tontos romper algo a trozos para volverlo a coser —afirmó Maggie, sacudiendo la melena—. Y no quiero hacer nada para la tía Glegg: no me gusta.

Maggie salió arrastrando la capota por la cinta mientras el señor Tulliver reía a carcajadas.

—No sé por qué te ríes, Tulliver —dijo la madre con linfática irritación —. Así fomentas sus travesuras, y las tías pensarán que soy yo quien la malcría. La señora Tulliver era lo que se llama una persona apacible: de pequeña jamás lloraba por nada, como no fuera por hambre o el pinchazo de un imperdible, y desde la cuna fue una niña sana, hermosa, gordita y boba, en definitiva, el orgullo de su familia, tanto por su aspecto como por su afabilidad. Pero la leche y la amabilidad no se conservan bien, y cuando se agrian un poco entran en serio conflicto con los estómagos jóvenes. Me he preguntado con frecuencia si estas madonas de Rafael, de rubios rostros y expresión pánfila, siguen siendo plácidas cuando sus chicos, de miembros

tan fuertes como su carácter, crecen un poquito y ya no pueden andar desnudos. Imagino que empezarán con débiles reconvenciones e irán tornándose más desabridas a medida que éstas sean menos eficaces.

Capítulo III

El señor Riley aconseja sobre un colegio para Tom

El caballero de la ancha corbata blanca y camisa con chorreras que toma tan a gusto un *brandy* con agua en compañía de su buen amigo Tulliver es el señor Riley: un caballero de rostro céreo y manos gruesas, tal vez muy culto para ser subastador y tasador pero lo bastante generoso para mostrar *bonhommie* hacia meras amistades rurales de hábitos hospitalarios. El señor Riley se refería amablemente a estos conocidos denominándolos «gente de la vieja escuel».

Se había producido una pausa en la conversación. El señor Tulliver, no sin una razón concreta, se abstuvo de repetir por séptima vez la fría respuesta por la cual Riley había demostrado ser muy superior a Dix y el modo en que había dado en la cresta a Wakem por primera vez en la vida, ahora que el asunto de la presa se había resuelto mediante arbitraje, y no insistió en que nunca se habría producido una disputa sobre la altura del agua si todo el mundo fuera como debiera y Pero Botero no hubiera creado los abogados. El señor Tulliver era, en términos generales, un hombre de opiniones seguras y tradicionales; sin embargo, en uno o dos puntos había confiado en su desasistido intelecto y había llegado a varias conclusiones discutibles, por ejemplo, que Pero Botero había creado las ratas, los gorgojos y los abogados. Lamentablemente, no tenía a nadie que le dijera que aquello era de un maniqueísmo absoluto; de haber sido así, habría advertido su error. No obstante, aquel día resultaba evidente que había triunfado el bien: ese asunto del salto de agua, por un motivo u otro, se

había enmarañado mucho, si bien, desde su punto de vista, estaba tan claro como el agua misma; pero a pesar de ser tan complicado, Riley se había impuesto. El señor Tulliver tomaba el *brandy* menos diluido que de costumbre y, para ser un hombre que tal vez tuviera unos cuantos cientos ociosos en el banco, manifestaba con cierta ligereza el alto aprecio que sentía por el talento profesional de su amigo.

Con todo, la presa constituía un tema de conversación permanente que podían reanudar en el mismo punto y en idéntica situación; y, como bien sabemos, el señor Tulliver deseaba ansiosamente el consejo del señor Riley sobre otra cuestión. Por ese motivo permaneció en silencio unos instantes tras el último sorbo y se frotó las rodillas con aire meditabundo. No era hombre partidario de las transiciones bruscas. Este mundo es muy enredoso, decía con frecuencia, y si conduces el carromato a toda prisa, puedes volcar en cualquier curva difícil. Entre tanto, el señor Riley no se mostraba impaciente. ¿Por qué iba a estarlo? Incluso Hotspur habría sido paciente si, en zapatillas junto a un cálido fuego, sorbiera abundante rapé mientras lo invitaban a tomar *brandy*.

—Me ronda una idea por la cabeza —anunció por fin el señor Tulliver en tono más bajo que de costumbre mientras volvía la cabeza hacia su compañero y lo miraba fijamente.

—¿Sí? —pregunto el señor Riley con aire de leve interés. Tenía los párpados céreos y pesados, las cejas arqueadas y conservaba la misma expresión en cualquier circunstancia. La impasibilidad de su rostro y la costumbre de tomar una pizca de rapé antes de responder hacía que el señor Tulliver lo considerara un oráculo.

—Es algo muy especial —prosiguió—: se trata de mi hijo Tom. Al oír este nombre, Maggie, que estaba sentada en un taburete bajo junto al fuego con un gran libro abierto sobre las rodillas, se echó hacia atrás el pesado cabello negro y alzó la vista con interés. Pocos sonidos despertaban a Maggie cuando soñaba ante un libro, pero el nombre de Tom era tan eficaz como el más estridente silbato: al instante se encontraba alerta, los ojos brillantes, como un vigilante terrier de Skye, resuelta a atacar a cualquiera que amenazara a Tom.

—Mire, me gustaría meterlo en otro colegio para el trimestre de verano —dijo el señor Tulliver—. Saldrá de la *'cademia* en marzo y dejaré que tenga un trimestre libre, pero quiero enviarlo a un colegio bueno de verdad, donde lo conviertan en un hombre instruido.

—Bien —contestó el señor Riley—, no puede darle nada mejor que una buena educación. Lo que no quiere decir —añadió amablemente— que no se pueda ser un excelente molinero y granjero, así como un hombre sagaz y sensato sin ayuda de maestro alguno.

—*Efetivamente* —asintió el señor Tulliver, guiñando un ojo y ladeando la cabeza—, pero esa es la cuestión: no tengo intención de que Tom sea molinero y granjero. No me conviene: ¡Caramba! Si lo convierto en molinero y granjero, estará esperando para hacerse con el molino y la tierra, acechándome como si ya fuera hora de que se lo dejara y pensara en morirme. ¡Quia! Ya he visto demasiados hijos así. Nunca me quito la ropa antes de irme a la cama. Daré a Tom educación y lo introduciré en los negocios para que pueda construirse un nido y no quiera echarme del mío. Me parece bien que se lo quede todo cuando yo esté muerto, pero mientras yo tenga todos los dientes, no permitiré que me den papillas.

No cabía duda de que el señor Tulliver tenía las ideas claras respecto a esta cuestión, y el ímpetu que había conferido a sus palabras una rapidez y un énfasis inusuales se mantuvo intacto durante unos minutos y se manifestó en desafiantes movimientos de la cabeza, que agitaba de un lado a otro mientras de vez en cuando todavía gruñía: «¡Quia!».

Maggie observó estos síntomas de enfado y se sintió herida en lo más vivo: al parecer, se consideraba que Tom era capaz de echar a su padre de su propia casa y de ser tan malo como para procurarles un futuro trágico. Aquello era insoportable: Maggie olvidó el pesado libro, que cayó con estruendo sobre el guardafuegos, saltó del taburete y, alzándose entre las rodillas de su padre, dijo con voz llorosa e indignada:

—Padre, Tom nunca se portará así de mal con usted: yo sé que nunca lo hará.

La señora Tulliver se encontraba fuera de la habitación, vigilando la exquisita cena, y el señor Tulliver se conmovió, de modo que no regañó a Maggie por tirar el libro. El señor Riley lo recogió en silencio y lo miró

mientras el padre reía con una ternura que suavizaba las duras líneas de su rostro y daba palmaditas a su hija en la espalda. Después le tomó las manos y la retuvo entre las rodillas.

—¡Vaya! Así que no debemos decir nada malo de Tom, ¿eh? —dijo el señor Tulliver guiñando un ojo a Maggie. Después, bajando la voz, se volvió hacia el señor Riley, como si Maggie no pudiera oírlo.

—Entiende como nadie todo lo que se dice. Y debería oír cómo lee: de un tirón, como si lo supiera todo de memoria. ¡Y está siempre con un libro en la mano! Pero es malo, es malo —añadió el señor Tulliver, entristecido, conteniendo aquella animación culpable—: una mujer no debe ser tan lista, me temo que no le trae más que problemas. Pero ¡bendita sea! —En ese momento volvió a dominarlo el entusiasmo—, lee los libros y los entiende mejor que la mayoría de los adultos.

Las mejillas de Maggie se sonrojaron de excitación y triunfo: le parecía que ahora el señor Riley sentiría respeto por ella; resultaba evidente que, hasta el momento, ni siquiera había reparado en su existencia.

El señor Riley pasaba las páginas del libro y Maggie era incapaz de adivinar nada en aquel rostro de altas cejas arqueadas. Él la miró y dijo:

—Ven a contarme algo de este libro; aquí hay algunas ilustraciones y quiero conocer lo que significan.

Maggie, cada vez más sonrojada, se acercó sin vacilar al codo del señor Riley y miró hacia el libro, lo agarró por una esquina y se apartó la melena mientras decía:

—Le voy a contar lo que quiere decir este dibujo. Es horrible, ¿verdad? Pero no soy capaz de mirar otra cosa. La vieja que está en el agua es una bruja, la han metido allí para averiguar si es bruja o no: si nada, es bruja, si se ahoga y se muere, claro, es inocente y no es bruja, sino solo una desgraciada vieja. Pero ¿de qué le servirá cuando esté ahogada? Bueno, supongo que se irá al cielo y Dios la compensará. Y le diré quién es este horrible herrero que se ríe con los brazos en jarras ¡Qué feo! ¿Verdad? Pues es el mismísimo diablo —aquí, Maggie alzó la voz con énfasis— y no un simple herrero; porque el diablo se encarna en los hombres malos y va por ahí haciendo que la gente haga cosas malas; es más normal que se encarne en un hombre malo porque si no es así y la gente se da cuenta de que es el

diablo y se asusta, todos salen corriendo y él no puede hacer que se comporten como él quiere.

El señor Tulliver había escuchado la descripción de Maggie inmóvil y maravillado.

—¡Caramba! ¿Qué libro tiene la niña? —exclamó finalmente.

—*La historia del diablo*, de Daniel Defoe. No es un libro adecuado para una niña pequeña —señaló el señor Riley—. ¿Cómo es que se encuentra entre sus libros, Tulliver?

Maggie parecía dolida y desalentada mientras su padre contestaba:

—¡Caramba! Es uno de los libros que compré en la venta de los objetos de Partridge. Todos tenían la misma encuadernación, una encuadernación buena, como puede ver, y pensé que serían todos buenos libros. Entre ellos está el de Jeremy Taylor *Vida y muerte santas*, que leo mucho los domingos.

—El señor Tulliver se sentía en cierto modo próximo a ese gran escritor porque también él se llamaba Jeremy. Y hay muchos otros, sobre todo sermones, me parece; pero tienen todos la misma cubierta y pensaba que eran todos de la misma clase, por así decirlo. Pero, al parecer, no se puede juzgar por las apariencias. Qué mundo tan enredoso es éste.

—Bien —dijo el señor Riley con tono de reprobación condescendiente mientras daba a Maggie unas palmaditas en la cabeza—. Te aconsejo que dejes La *historia del diablo* y leas algún libro más bonito. ¿No tienes otros?

—¡Oh, sí! —exclamó Maggie, animándose un poco con el deseo de defender la diversidad de sus lecturas—. Ya sé que lo que cuenta este libro no es bonito, pero me gustan las imágenes y me invento historias sobre las ilustraciones. Tengo las *Fábulas* de Esopo, un libro sobre los canguros y esas cosas, y también El *viaje del peregrino*…

—Ah, un buen libro —declaró el señor Riley—. No podrías leer otro mejor.

—Bueno, pues habla mucho del demonio —dijo Maggie con aire triunfal—. Le enseñaré el retrato que lo pinta tal cual es combatiendo contra Cristiano.

Maggie corrió en un instante a un rincón de la habitación, saltó sobre una silla y extrajo de la pequeña librería un viejo ejemplar de la obra de

Bunyan, que abrió al instante, sin vacilar en la búsqueda, por la imagen deseada.

—Aquí está —dijo, corriendo de regreso hacia el señor Riley—. Y Tom me lo coloreó con sus pinturas durante las últimas vacaciones, cuando vino a casa: mire, el cuerpo bien negro y los ojos rojos, como fuego, porque por dentro es todo fuego y le sale por los ojos.

—Anda, vete —ordenó el señor Tulliver, empezando a sentirse incómodo por las observaciones sobre el aspecto personal de un ser lo bastante poderoso para crear los abogados—. Cierra el libro y no hables más *d'*esas cosas. Lo que yo decía: la niña aprende más cosas malas que buenas en los libros. Anda, vete con tu madre.

Maggie cerró el libro de inmediato, avergonzada, pero como no deseaba acudir junto a su madre, optó por una solución de compromiso y se marchó a un rincón oscuro situado tras la butaca de su padre para jugar con su muñeca, por la que sentía súbitos arrebatos de cariño cuando Tom no estaba y, aunque no la acicalaba apenas, le daba tantos besos cariñosos que las mejillas de cera tenían un aspecto desgastado y enfermizo.

—¿Ha visto alguna vez algo semejante? —preguntó el señor Tulliver cuando Maggie se retiró—. Es una pena, porque si hubiera sido varón seguro que habría estado a la altura de muchos abogados. Es asombroso —añadió, bajando la voz—, pues escogí a su madre porque era guapa y no demasiado lista, y venía de una familia muy ordenada: la preferí a sus hermanas porque era un poco boba, y yo no quería que me mandasen en mi propia casa. Pero ya ve, cuando un hombre tiene cerebro, no se sabe dónde va a ir a parar; y la mujer boba puede darle chicos tontos y niñas listas, así son las cosas, como si el mundo estuviera patas para arriba. Qué cosas tan enredadas pasan.

El señor Riley abandonó unos instantes el aire grave y agitó la cabeza para aspirar un poco de rapé.

—Pero su chico no es tonto, ¿no? Lo vi la última vez que estuve por aquí, fabricando unos aparejos de pesca; parecía bastante hábil.

—Bueno, no es lo que se dice tonto: sabe cosas que no tienen que ver con los estudios; tiene sentido común y habilidad manual, pero es de lengua torpe, lee mal y no soporta los libros; según me dicen, escribe con muchas

faltas, es muy tímido con los desconocidos y nunca dice cosas agudas, como la mocita. Así que lo que quiero es enviarlo a un colegio donde le enseñen a manejar la lengua y la pluma y lo conviertan en un mozo despabilado. Quiero que mi hijo pueda mirar de tú a tú a esos individuos que tanta ventaja me llevan por haber tenido mejor educación. Si el mundo se hubiera quedado como Dios lo hizo, yo habría podido hacer carrera y medirme con el mejor de ellos, pero las cosas se han complicado y se han liado mucho con palabras poco razonables. Todo es tan embarullado que, cuanto más honrado es uno, más enredado está.

El señor Tulliver tomó un sorbo, lo tragó lentamente y agitó la cabeza con gesto melancólico, convencido de ser el vivo ejemplo de que un intelecto cuerdo no puede encontrar su sitio en este mundo enloquecido.

—Tiene usted mucha razón, Tulliver —señaló Riley—. Es mejor gastar varios cientos en la educación de un hijo que legárselos en el testamento. Yo también lo haría si hubiera tenido un hijo, aunque no dispongo de tanto como usted, Tulliver, y, por añadidura, tengo la casa llena de hijas.

—Me pregunto si conocerá usted un colegio adecuado para Tom —quiso saber el señor Tulliver, sin que la escasez de dinero en efectivo del señor Riley lo distrajera de su idea.

El señor Riley tomó una pulgarada de rapé y mantuvo a Tulliver en vilo con un silencio aparentemente reflexivo antes de decir:

—Sé de una excelente oportunidad para quien tenga el dinero necesario, y usted lo tiene, Tulliver. Lo cierto es que no recomendaría a ningún amigo mío que enviara a su hijo a un colegio normal y corriente si pudiera permitirse algo mejor. Pero si alguien quisiera que su hijo tuviera una instrucción y una formación superiores, que fuera compañero de su maestro y éste fuera un individuo de primera, conozco al hombre adecuado. No se lo diría a cualquiera, porque no creo que cualquiera pueda contratarlo aunque quisiera, pero se lo digo a usted, Tulliver, y que quede entre nosotros.

La mirada inquisitiva con que el señor Tulliver contemplaba el rostro oracular de su amigo se tornó ansiosa.

—Pues cuénteme —dijo, acomodándose en la butaca con la complacencia de quien es considerado digno de importantes confidencias.

—Ha estudiado en Oxford —sentenció el señor Riley, cerrando la boca y mirando al señor Tulliver para observar el efecto de aquella información tan estimulante.

—¡Cómo! ¿Un clérigo? —preguntó el señor Tulliver con aire poco convencido.

—Sí, y también *magister artium* Según tengo entendido, el obispo lo tiene en gran estima, e incluso fue él quien le concedió el actual curato.

—Ah, ¿sí? —preguntó el señor Tulliver, para el cual todo resultaba igualmente maravilloso en lo que respectaba a aquellos fenómenos tan poco familiares—. Entonces, ¿por qué iba a interesarle enseñar a Tom?

—Bien, le encanta enseñar y desea seguir estudiando, pero un clérigo tiene pocas oportunidades para ello debido a sus deberes parroquiales. Desea tomar uno o dos niños como pupilos para ocupar el tiempo de modo provechoso. Los chicos serían como de la familia, lo mejor para ellos, y estarían siempre bajo la vigilancia directa de Stelling.

—¿Y cree que dejarían repetir de pudín al pobre chico? —preguntó la señora Tulliver, que se encontraba otra vez en su sitio—. Le gusta el pudín con locura y sería terrible que se lo escatimaran a un chico que está creciendo.

—¿Y cuánto dinero querría? —quiso saber el señor Tulliver, cuyo instinto le decía que los servicios de aquel admirable licenciado en letras tendrían un alto precio.

—¡Vaya! Pues sé de un clérigo que pide ciento cincuenta a los alumnos más jóvenes y no tiene punto de comparación con Stelling, el hombre de quien le hablo. Sé de buena tinta que un personaje de Oxford dijo en una ocasión: «Stelling podría alcanzar los más altos honores, si lo desear». Pero no le interesaban los honores universitarios. Es un hombre callado, no le gusta hacerse ver ni notar.

—Ah, mucho mejor, mucho mejor —dijo el señor Tulliver—. Pero ciento cincuenta es un precio extraordinario; ni me había pasado por la cabeza pagar tanto.

—Permita que le diga, Tulliver, que una buena educación nunca es cara. Sin embargo, las condiciones de Stelling son moderadas, no es codicioso.

No dudo de que aceptará a su hijo por cien, cosa que no harían muchos clérigos. Si quiere, le escribiré preguntándoselo.

El señor Tulliver se frotó las rodillas y contempló fijamente la alfombra con aire meditabundo.

—Pero seguro que será soltero —señaló la señora Tulliver en el intervalo—, y tengo una pésima opinión de las amas de llaves. Mi hermano, que en paz descanse, tuvo una vez un ama de llaves que le quitó la mitad de las plumas de la mejor cama, las metió en un paquete y las envió lejos. Ni se sabe cuánta ropa de casa le quitó: se llamaba Stott. Me rompería el corazón enviar a Tom a una casa con ama de llaves, y espero que ni se *t'*ocurra hacerlo, Tulliver.

—Tranquilícese en esta cuestión, señora Tulliver —contestó Riley—, porque Stelling está casado con la mejor mujercita que puede desear un hombre. No hay alma más afable en este mundo; conozco bien a su familia. Tiene un cutis como el suyo y el cabello claro y ondulado. Procede de una buena familia de Mudport que no habría aceptado a cualquiera, pero Stelling no es un hombre vulgar. En realidad, es bastante exigente en la elección de sus amistades, pero creo sinceramente que no pondrá reparos a su hijo: supongo que no lo hará, ya que irá en mi nombre.

—No sé qué podría tener en contra del muchacho —protestó la señora Tulliver con cierta indignación maternal—: es un niño sano y hermoso como el que más.

—Pero se me ocurre una cosa —dijo el señor Tulliver, ladeando la cabeza y mirando al señor Riley tras examinar atentamente la alfombra—: ¿No será demasiado instruido, por así decir, para convertir al muchacho en un hombre de negocios? Por lo que sé, los clérigos saben cosas que, mayormente, no se ven. Y no es eso lo que quiero para Tom. Quiero que sepa de números, que escriba como de imprenta, que pille las cosas al vuelo y sepa lo que quiere decir la gente, que sepa envolverlo todo en palabras por las que no le puedan demandar. Pocas veces uno tiene la oportunidad —concluyó el señor Tulliver, moviendo la cabeza— de decir a un hombre lo que uno piensa de él sin pagar por ello.

—Querido Tulliver —contestó el señor Riley—: está totalmente equivocado en relación con el clero: los mejores profesores son siempre

clérigos. Los que no lo son, por lo general son hombres de muy baja categoría…

—*Esacto*, como ese Jacobs de la *'cademia* —interrumpió el señor Tulliver.

—Casi siempre son hombres que han fracasado en otras empresas. En cambio, un clérigo es un caballero por su profesión y por su educación: y, además, tiene conocimientos para dar una sólida base a un muchacho y prepararlo para iniciar cualquier carrera profesional con éxito. Quizá algunos clérigos sean meros eruditos, pero puede estar seguro de que Stelling no es uno de ellos. Permita que le diga que es un hombre muy despierto. Lo entiende todo con medias palabras. Y si de números se trata, sólo tiene que decir a Stelling: «Quiero que mi hijo sea un perfecto aritmétic» y dejarle hacer.

El señor Riley hizo una pequeña pausa mientras el señor Tulliver, algo más tranquilo en cuanto a la enseñanza de los clérigos, ensayaba para sí una declaración dirigida al señor Stelling: «Quiero que mi hijo sepa *rimética*».

—Mire, apreciado Tulliver —prosiguió el señor Riley—, un hombre como Stelling, con una educación completa, domina todas las ramas. Cuando un artesano sabe usar las herramientas, tanto puede fabricar una puerta como una ventana.

—*Esacto*, eso es verdad —dijo el señor Tulliver, casi convencido de que los miembros del clero eran los mejores maestros.

—Pues bien, le diré lo que voy a hacer por usted —anunció el señor Riley—, y no lo haría por cualquiera. Cuando regrese a Mudport, veré al suegro de Stelling o le escribiré unas líneas para decirle que usted desearía colocar a su chico con su yerno, y me aventuro a afirmar que Stelling le escribirá para detallar sus condiciones.

—Pero no hay prisa, ¿no? —inquirió la señora Tulliver—. Tulliver, espero que no permitas que Tom empiece en esta nueva escuela antes del trimestre de verano. Empezó en la *'cademia* en el trimestre de primavera, y ya ves cómo le ha ido.

—*Esactamente*, *esactamente*, Bessy. No por mucho madrugar amanece más temprano —declaró el señor Tulliver, guiñando el ojo y sonriendo al señor Riley con el orgullo natural del hombre que tiene una mujer hermosa

y de intelecto notablemente inferior al suyo—. Tienes razón en que no hay prisa, en eso has dado en el blanco, Bessy.

—Sin embargo, sería preferible no retrasar demasiado el acuerdo —intervino el señor Riley discretamente—, ya que Stelling podría tener otras propuestas, y sé que no quiere tomar más de dos o tres alumnos, como mucho. En su lugar, intentaría ponerme en contacto con Stelling lo antes posible: aunque no hay necesidad de enviar al chico antes del verano, yo me aseguraría de que nadie se le adelanta.

—*Esactamente*. Hay que tenerlo en cuenta —dijo el señor Tulliver.

—Padre —intervino Maggie que había avanzado sigilosamente, sin que nadie lo advirtiera, hasta colocarse junto a su padre y escuchaba con la boca abierta mientas sostenía la muñeca cabeza abajo y aplastaba la nariz de ésta contra la madera de la butaca—. Padre, ¿está muy lejos el sitio donde se irá Tom? ¿Iremos a verlo?

—No lo sé, mocita —contestó el padre con ternura—. Pregúntaselo al señor Riley, él lo sabe.

Maggie se plantó delante del señor Riley.

—Por favor, señor, ¿a qué distancia está?

—Oh, está muy lejos —contestó el caballero, que era de la opinión que, cuando los niños no eran traviesos, se les debía hablar en broma—. Tendrás que pedir prestadas las botas de siete leguas para llegar.

—¡Qué tontería! —contestó Maggie. Se apartó el cabello con gesto altivo. Y se alejó con lágrimas en los ojos. Aquel señor Riley empezaba a serle antipático: resultaba evidente que la tenía por tonta e insignificante.

—¡Cállate, Maggie! ¿No te da vergüenza hacer preguntas y cotorrear tanto? —la regañó su madre—. Siéntate en el taburete y mantén la lengua quietecita —y alarmada, preguntó—: ¿Cae tan lejos que no pueda lavarle ni remendarle la ropa?

—Unas quince millas solamente —contestó el señor Riley—. Se puede ir y volver en un solo día. Pero Stelling es un hombre hospitalario y agradable, se alegrará de alojarlos.

—Aunque me parece que está demasiado lejos para la ropa —reflexionó la señora Tulliver, apenada.

La llegada de la cena aplazó oportunamente esta dificultad y alivió al señor Riley de la tarea de sugerir alguna solución o compromiso, misión que, sin duda, se habría encomendado porque, como habrás visto, lector, era un hombre muy atento y servicial. Y se había tomado la molestia de recomendar el señor Stelling a su amigo Tulliver sin esperar por ello nada a cambio, a pesar de las sutiles indicaciones de lo contrario que podrían haber engañado a un observador demasiado sagaz, puesto que, sin duda, nada es más engañoso que la sagacidad mal encaminada. El empeño en creer que los hombres suelen actuar y hablar por motivos concretos, con un propósito consciente, supone un despilfarro de energía en un juego imaginario. Los planes codiciosos y las artimañas deliberadas para maquinar un fin egoísta sólo abundan en el mundo de los dramaturgos: exigen una actividad mental excesiva para la mayoría de nuestros conciudadanos. No es necesario tomarse tantas molestias para fastidiar la vida al vecino: es más fácil hacerlo mediante la perezosa aquiescencia o la omisión, con falsedades triviales que apenas obedecen a razón alguna, pequeños fraudes compensados por pequeños excesos, torpes halagos e insinuaciones toscamente improvisadas. La mayoría de nosotros vivimos al día, con escasos deseos inmediatos: hacemos poco más que arrebatar un bocado para satisfacer a la camada hambrienta y pocas veces pensamos en las semillas para la siembra siguiente.

El señor Riley era un hombre de negocios que no descuidaba sus intereses y, sin embargo, incluso en él influían más los pequeños impulsos que los planes a largo plazo. No había llegado a ningún acuerdo privado con el reverendo Walter Stelling; al contrario, sabía muy poco del licenciado o de sus méritos: tal vez no lo suficiente para avalar aquella calurosa recomendación a su amigo Tulliver. No obstante, creía que Stelling era un excelente clasicista, ya que lo había dicho Gadsby, y el primo carnal de Gadsby era profesor en Oxford: argumento más sólido de lo que habría sido su observación directa, porque aunque Riley había recibido cierto barniz clásico en la magnífica escuela gratuita de Mudport y creía comprender el latín en términos generales, lo cierto era que le costaba entenderlo. Sin duda, conservaba un leve aroma del contacto juvenil con *De senectute* y el cuarto libro de la *Eneida*, pero éste ya no podía reconocerse como parte de

una formación clásica y sólo se distinguía en el refinamiento y la fuerza de su estilo en las subastas. Además, Stelling se había licenciado en Oxford y los licenciados de Oxford siempre eran… No, no: los buenos matemáticos eran los de Cambridge. De todos modos, un universitario puede dar clases de lo que sea, especialmente un hombre como Stelling, que en una cena política celebrada en Mudport pronunció un discurso tan brillante que todo el mundo señaló que el yerno de Timpson era un individuo muy listo. Y era de esperar que cualquier habitante de Mudport de la parroquia de Santa Úrsula no pasara por alto la oportunidad de hacer un favor a un yerno de Timpson, puesto que Timpson era uno de los hombres más útiles e influyentes del lugar y tenía muchos negocios que sabía poner en las manos adecuadas. El señor Riley apreciaba a esta clase de hombres, al margen de cualquier consideración sobre el dinero que, gracias a su buen juicio, éstos pudieran hacer pasar de bolsillos menos dignos al suyo; y supondría para él una satisfacción poder decir a Timpson al regresar a su ciudad: «He conseguido un buen alumno para su yern». Riley compadecía a Timpson por tener tantas hijas y, además, el rostro de Louisa Timpson, con sus rizos claros, sentada los domingos en el banco de la iglesia, se había convertido en una imagen familiar a lo largo de casi quince años: era cosa natural que su marido fuera un profesor digno de encomio. Por otra parte, Riley no conocía a ningún otro profesor que pudiera recomendar: ¿por qué no iba a hablar en favor de Stelling? Su amigo Tulliver le había pedido opinión y resultaba sumamente desagradable confesar a un amigo que uno no tiene opinión alguna que dar. Y si uno la da, es de tontos no hacerlo con aire de convicción y seguridad bien fundada. Al expresarla, uno la hace suya y se entusiasma de modo natural. Así, Riley —que, para empezar, no sabía nada malo de Stelling y que, en la medida en que pudiera desearle algo, sólo sería bueno— en cuanto lo recomendó empezó a sentir admiración por un hombre recomendado con tanta autoridad y a experimentar tanto interés por el asunto que, si el señor Tulliver hubiese decidido no enviar a Tom con Stelling, Riley habría pensado que aquel amigo «de la vieja escuel» era un completo cabezota.

Lector, si censuras severamente a Riley por hablar de alguien con tanto entusiasmo y tan poco fundamento, deberé decirte que eres demasiado

riguroso. ¿Por qué, treinta años atrás, un subastador y tasador que había olvidado el latín de la escuela gratuita debería mostrar una delicada escrupulosidad que no siempre poseen los caballeros de profesiones ilustradas, ni siquiera en esta época nuestra de tanta moralidad?

Además, un hombre «lleno de la leche de la bondad human»[1], difícilmente puede abstenerse de hacer una buena obra cuando se le presenta la oportunidad, y nadie puede ser bueno en todos los aspectos. La propia naturaleza aloja, en ocasiones, un parásito nocivo en un animal al que no desea ningún mal. ¿Por qué? Es admirable cómo atiende al parásito. Si el señor Riley se hubiera abstenido de dar una recomendación que no se basaba en pruebas sólidas no habría ayudado a Stelling a conseguir un alumno de pago, con lo cual éste habría salido perjudicado. Y debemos también tener en cuenta que se habría visto privado del gusto de manifestar sus difusas opiniones y de otros pequeños placeres, tales como quedar bien con Timpson, dar consejo cuando se lo solicitaban, impresionar al amigo Tulliver y crecer en su estima, decir algo con énfasis, así como de otros ingredientes insignificantes que se sumaron al calor de la chimenea y el *brandy* diluido para avivar la conciencia del señor Riley en aquella ocasión.

Capítulo IV

Se espera la llegada de Tom

Maggie se llevó una gran decepción cuando no le permitieron ir en la calesa con su padre para recoger a Tom en la academia y llevarlo a casa; pero la mañana era demasiado lluviosa, declaró la señora Tulliver, para que saliera una niña cubierta con su mejor capota. Maggie defendió con empeño el punto de vista contrario y, como consecuencia directa de esta diferencia de opinión, cuando su madre estaba cepillando la rebelde melena negra, Maggie escapó de sus manos y sumergió la cabeza en una palangana cercana, movida por la vengativa decisión de que aquel día no hubiera más rizos.

—Maggie, Maggie —exclamó la señora Tulliver, enérgica e impotente, sentada con los cepillos en el regazo—. ¿Qué va a ser de ti, si eres tan traviesa? Se lo contaré a la tía Glegg y a la tía Pullet cuando vengan la semana que viene y nunca más te querrán. ¡Vaya por Dios! Mira el delantal limpio, empapado de arriba abajo. La gente pensará que esta niña es un castigo de Dios por algo malo que he hecho.

Antes de que terminara la reconvención, Maggie se encontraba ya tan lejos que no podía oírla, de camino al gran desván que se extendía bajo el viejo y agudo tejado, sacudiéndose el agua de los negros mechones mientras corría, como un terrier de Skye escapado del baño. Este desván era el refugio favorito de Maggie cuando llovía y no hacía demasiado frío: allí se esfumaba su mal humor, hablaba en voz alta a los suelos y estantes carcomidos, y a las oscuras vigas engalanadas con telas de araña, y allí

guardaba un fetiche al que castigaba por todas sus desventuras. Era una gran muñeca de madera que en otros tiempos miraba fijamente con ojos redondísimos sobre sonrosadísimas mejillas, desfigurada ahora tras una larga vida de sufrimiento vicario. Los tres clavos hundidos en la cabeza conmemoraban otras tantas crisis sucedidas durante los nueve años de lucha terrena, después de que la imagen de Yael matando a Sísera en una vieja Biblia le sugiriera esa refinada venganza. El último clavo lo había hundido con un golpe más violento que de costumbre, porque en esa ocasión el fetiche representaba a la tía Glegg. Pero inmediatamente después, Maggie pensó que si hundía demasiados clavos no podría imaginar que la cabeza se lastimaba cuando la golpeaba contra la pared, ni tampoco podría consolarla o simular una cataplasma cuando se le pasaba la furia, ya que incluso la tía Glegg era digna de lástima cuando estaba herida y humillada hasta el punto de rogar a su sobrina que la perdonara. A partir de entonces, no le hundió más clavos y se tranquilizó frotando y golpeando la cabeza de madera contra los ladrillos rojos de las grandes chimeneas que formaban los dos pilares cuadrados que sostenían el tejado. Y eso fue lo que hizo aquella mañana al llegar a la buhardilla mientras sollozaba con una pasión tal que eliminaba cualquier otra forma de conciencia, incluso el recuerdo del agravio que la había provocado. Cuando, finalmente, los sollozos se extinguían y aplastaba ya a la muñeca con menos furia, un repentino rayo de sol que entró por la celosía de alambre y fue a dar sobre los estantes carcomidos la empujó a lanzar la muñeca y a correr a la ventana. El sol se abría paso, el sonido del molino parecía otra vez alegre, las puertas del granero estaban abiertas y allí se encontraba Yap, el raro terrier blanco y castaño con una oreja hacia atrás, trotando por ahí y olfateando vagamente, como si buscara un compañero. Era irresistible: Maggie se apartó el cabello hacia atrás y corrió escaleras abajo, agarró la capota y, sin ponérsela, echó un vistazo y salió corriendo por el pasillo para no cruzarse con su madre; pronto se encontró en el patio, dando vueltas sobre sí misma como una pitonisa.

—Yap, Yap: Tom viene a casa —cantó mientras Yap brincaba y ladraba a su alrededor, como si dijera que si lo que hacía falta era ruido, allí estaba él.

—¡Eh, eh!, señorita, que se va a marear y se va a caer al suelo —gritó Luke, el encargado del molino, un hombre de gran estatura y hombros anchos, de ojos y cabello negro, que contaba cuarenta años de edad; estaba espolvoreado de harina, como si fuera una prímula aurícula.

Maggie dejó de dar vueltas un momento y dijo, tambaleándose un poco.

—Oh, no, no me mareo. Luke, ¿puedo entrar en el molino contigo?

A Maggie le gustaba vagar por el gran espacio interior del molino y muchas veces salía con el cabello negro cubierto de una suave blancura que le hacía brillar los ojos oscuros con nuevo fuego. El resuelto estruendo, el movimiento incesante de las grandes piedras —que provocaba en ella un vago y delicioso temor, como si se encontrara ante una fuerza incontrolable —, la harina que caía y caía, el fino polvo blanco que suavizaba todas las superficies y hacía que las mismas telarañas parecieran encajes feéricos, el olor puro y agradable de la harina: todo ello contribuía a que Maggie sintiera que el molino era un mundo pequeño, distinto de su vida cotidiana. Las arañas, en especial, le llamaban la atención: se preguntaba si tendrían parientes en el exterior del molino, porque en ese caso la relación familiar debería de ser muy complicada: una araña gorda y harinosa, acostumbrada a comer moscas bien espolvoreadas, sufriría un poco cuando la invitara una prima a tomar moscas *au naturel*, y las señoras arañas se sorprenderían bastante al comparar su distinto aspecto. Pero la zona del molino que más le gustaba era el piso superior, donde se almacenaba el grano en grandes montones, sobre los que se podía sentar y deslizarse una y otra vez. Tenía costumbre de hacerlo mientras conversaba con Luke, con el que se mostraba muy comunicativa porque deseaba que tuviera una buena opinión de su inteligencia, como su padre.

Quizá, en aquella ocasión, le pareció necesario recuperar su posición ante él porque, mientras se deslizaba sobre el montón de grano junto al que él trabajaba, le gritó con el tono agudo imprescindible en la vida social del molino.

—Imagino que el único libro que has leído es la Biblia, ¿no, Luke?

—Ajá, señorita. Y no gran cosa —contestó Luke con franqueza—. No soy de mucho leer.

—¿Y si te presto uno de mis libros, Luke? No tengo libros muy bonitos que puedan ser fáciles, pero tengo el *Viaje por Europa de Pug*[2] que *t'*explicará cómo son los distintos tipos de personas que hay en el mundo, y si no entiendes lo que pone, las imágenes *t'*ayudarán, porque enseñan el aspecto y las costumbres de la gente y lo que hacen. Por ejemplo, salen los holandeses, que son gordos y fuman, y uno está sentado en un barril.

—¡Ca!, ¡señorita! No me gustan los holandeses. No gano nada sabiendo cosas suyas.

—Pero son nuestros semejantes, Luke: debemos saber cosas de nuestros semejantes.

—No tan semejantes, digo yo, señorita. Lo único que sé es lo que pensaba mi antiguo amo, un individuo sabio que decía: «No se le ocurre ni a un holandés sembrar trigo sin quemar rastrojo». Lo que quiere decir que dos holandeses son tontos. ¡Ca!, no pienso ocuparme ni un momento de dos holandeses: ya hay aquí bastantes tontos y sinvergüenzas *pa* buscarlos en dos libros.

—Ah, bueno —contestó Maggie, bastante decepcionada por aquellos puntos de vista inesperadamente firmes sobre dos holandeses—. Entonces, a lo mejor te gustaría más la *Naturaleza viva*, que no tiene holandeses, sino elefantes, canguros y civetas, peces duna y un pájaro que se sienta sobre la cola y no recuerdo cómo se llama. Hay países llenos de animales como estos en lugar de caballos y vacas, ¿lo sabías? ¿No te gustaría saber cosas sobre ellos?

—¡Ca, señorita! Lo mío es contar la harina y el trigo: *pa* qué voy a saber otras cosas. Eso es lo que lleva a la gente a la horca: saber de todo menos lo importante *pa* ganarse el pan. Y casi to lo de dos libros es mentira. Las hojas impresas mienten tanto como dos vendedores callejeros.

—Vaya, Luke: eres como mi hermano Tom —dijo Maggie, deseando dar un giro agradable a da conversación—. A Tom no le gusta leer. Lo quiero más que a nadie en el mundo, Luke. Cuando crezca, yo me ocuparé de su casa y viviremos siempre juntos. Yo puedo contarle todo lo que no sabe. Pero yo creo que Tom es listo, aunque no le gusten los libros: sabe fabricar bonitas cuerdas para látigos y jaulas para conejos.

—Ah —dijo Luke—, *pos* se llevará un disgusto porque se han muerto *tos*.

—¡Se han muerto! —gritó Maggie, levantándose de un brinco de la pendiente del grano—. ¡Oh, Luke! ¿El de las orejas gachas y la coneja con manchitas en las que Tom se gastó todo su dinero?

—Están muertos como topos —contestó Luke, utilizando como elemento de comparación dos inconfundibles cadáveres colgados de un clavo en la pared del establo.

—Oh, querido Luke —se lamentó Maggie mientras le rodaban lágrimas por las mejillas—: Tom me encargó que me ocupara de ellos y se me olvidó. ¿Y ahora qué hago?

—Bueno, señorita, es que estaban en esa caseta de aperos que esta tan lejos y nadie se ocupaba de ellos. Creo que el señorito Tom le dijo a Harry que les diera de comer, pero no se puede contar con él: no iba nunca a ocuparse, porque no piensa en *na* más que en sus tripas: ojalá se le rompan.

—Pero Luke, Tom me dijo que me acordara de dos conejos cada día, pero ¿cómo iba a hacerlo, si ni me pasaban por la cabeza? Ay, se enfadará muchísimo conmigo, estoy segura, y se pondrá muy triste por los conejos, por eso yo también estoy triste. ¿Y ahora qué hago?

—Calma, señorita —dijo Luke con voz tranquilizadora—. Los conejos de orejas gachas son muy *delicaos y* se habrían muerto de *tos* modos. Las cosas que van contra la naturaleza no prosperan, a Dios nuestro señor no le gustan. Hizo a los conejos con las orejas *pa'trás* y no tienen *na* que hacer con las orejas *palante*, como las de un mastín. Así aprenderá el señorito Tom a no comprar cosas *d'*esas. Tranquila, señorita. ¿Quiere venir a ver a mi mujer? Me voy ahora mismo.

La invitación supuso una agradable distracción para la pena de Maggie, y las lágrimas fueron desapareciendo mientras trotaba junto a Luke en dirección a la agradable casita que se alzaba entre manzanos y perales y disfrutaba de la dignidad adicional de un cobertizo a modo de pocilga junto a la orilla del Ripple. La señora Moggs, la esposa de Luke, le resultaba muy simpática: materializaba su hospitalidad en pan y melaza y, además, era dueña de varias obras de arte. Maggie olvidó que tuviera algún motivo de tristeza aquella mañana tras subirse a una silla para contemplar una notable

serie de ilustraciones que representaban al hijo pródigo vestido como *sir* Charles Grandison, con la única excepción de que, como era de esperar de un carácter de tan escasa moralidad, a diferencia del héroe consumado, no había tenido ni el gusto ni la entereza suficientes para prescindir de la peluca. Sin embargo, la carga indefinible que habían dejado en su espíritu los conejos muertos de hicieron sentir más pena que de costumbre por la vida de aquel débil joven, especialmente cuando contempló la imagen donde se apoyaba en un árbol con aspecto fláccido, los calzones desabrochados y la peluca torcida, mientras dos cerdos, aparentemente de una raza extranjera, parecían insultarlo devorando cascabillo animadamente.

—Me alegro mucho de que su padre lo aceptara, ¿tú no, Luke? —preguntó Maggie—. Porque él estaba muy arrepentido, sabes, y no quería volverlo a hacer.

—Eh, señorita —contestó Luke—. El chico no era gran cosa, hiciera lo que hiciera su padre.

Esta idea entristeció a Maggie, que habría deseado conocer la historia posterior del joven.

Capítulo V

Tom llega a casa

Tom debía llegar a primera hora de la tarde, y el corazón de Maggie no era el único que latía con fuerza cuando se acercó el momento de oír el sonido de las ruedas del coche; puesto que si la señora Tulliver albergaba algún sentimiento intenso, éste era el amor por su hijo. Por fin se oyó el rodar de la calesa y, a pesar del viento que empujaba las nubes y que probablemente no respetaría ni los rizos ni las cintas de su cofia, salió a la puerta e incluso colocó una mano sobre la transgresora cabeza de Maggie, olvidando todos los disgustos de la mañana.

—¡Ahí está mi niño! ¡Santo cielo, si no lleva cuello! ¡Seguro que se le ha caído por el camino, como si lo viera, y ha echado a perder la camisa! La señora Tulliver aguardaba con los brazos abiertos y Maggie daba saltitos, cambiando el peso de una pierna a la otra, mientras Tom descendía de la calesa.

—¡Hola! Yap, ¿tú también estás aquí? —dijo Tom, conteniendo virilmente sus emociones.

Con todo, se mostró dispuesto a aceptar los besos, aunque Maggie se le colgó al cuello como si quisiera estrangularlo, mientras sus ojos de color gris azulado vagaban por la granja, los corderos y el río, al que se prometió ir a pescar al día siguiente en cuanto se levantara. Era uno de esos chicos que se pueden encontrar en cualquier lugar de Inglaterra y que, a los doce o trece años, son tan parecidos entre sí como los ansarones: tenía el cabello castaño claro, las mejillas sonrosadas, los labios gruesos y la nariz y las

cejas indefinidas; en suma, una fisionomía en la que parecía imposible discernir otra cosa que la muchachez, radicalmente opuesta a la de Maggie, a la cual la Naturaleza parecía haber moldeado y coloreado con la más definida de las intenciones. Sin embargo, esta misma Naturaleza posee una profunda astucia y se esconde cuando simula ser diáfana, de modo que las personas simples creen poder ver a través de ella con facilidad mientras ésta prepara una refutación de sus confiadas profecías. Bajo estas fisionomías de muchacho, tan frecuentes que parecen fabricadas en serie, oculta algunos de sus propósitos más rígidos e inflexibles, algunos de los caracteres más inamovibles; y, al mismo tiempo, la niña efusiva y rebelde de ojos oscuros puede resultar una persona pasiva en comparación con este pequeño fragmento de masculinidad de rasgos anodinos.

—Maggie —dijo Tom con aire confidencial, llevándosela a un rincón, en cuanto su madre se marchó para examinar el contenido de la caja del equipaje y el cálido salón lo despojó del frío que había sentido durante el largo viaje—: a que no sabes lo que tengo en el bolsillo —anunció moviendo la cabeza arriba y abajo para producir mayor sensación de misterio.

—No. Parece redondo y pesado. ¿Son canicas o avellanas? —contestó Maggie con cierto disgusto, porque Tom siempre decía que no valía la pena jugar con ella a esos juegos porque lo hacía muy mal.

—No son canicas. Las he cambiado todas con unos niños. Y las avellanas no son divertidas, tonta, sólo sirven cuando están verdes. ¡Mira esto! —dijo, enseñando el extremo de algo que llevaba en el bolsillo derecho.

—¿Qué es? —preguntó Maggie con un susurro—. Sólo veo un trocito de algo amarillo.

—¡Adivínalo, Maggie!

—Ya sabes que no soy capaz de adivinarlo, Tom —contestó Maggie impaciente.

—Si tienes malas pulgas, no te lo diré —dijo Tom, metiendo la mano de nuevo en el bolsillo con aire resuelto.

—No, Tom —imploró Maggie, asiendo el rígido brazo de Tom—. Si no me enfado, Tom: es que no me gusta jugar a las adivinanzas. Por favor, sé

bueno.

El brazo de Tom se relajó lentamente.

—Pues son dos sedales nuevos para pescar: uno para ti, Maggie, para ti sola. No he querido pagar a medias los *toffees* ni las galletas de jengibre para ahorrar dinero; y Gibson y Spouncer se pelearon conmigo. Aquí tengo los anzuelos, ¡mira! Oye, ¿vamos mañana a pescar al estanque redondo? Podrás pescar tú solita, Maggie, poner los gusanos y todo lo demás. Qué divertido, ¿no?

A modo de respuesta, Maggie rodeó el cuello de Tom con los brazos, lo estrechó y apretó su mejilla contra la de él sin decir nada. Él, mientras tanto, desenrollaba lentamente un poco de hilo.

—¿A que soy un buen hermano por comprarte un sedal? —preguntó tras una pausa—. Ya sabes que no tenía por qué comprarlo si no quería.

—Eres buenísimo… Y yo te quiero mucho, Tom.

Tom se había guardado el sedal en el bolsillo y examinó los anzuelos, uno por uno, antes de hablar.

—Y los chicos se pelearon conmigo porque no cedí con lo de los *toffees*.

—Vaya, me gustaría qué nadie se peleara contigo, Tom. ¿Te hicieron daño?

—¿Daño? No —contestó Tom. Envolvió de nuevo los anzuelos, sacó una gran navaja, abrió lentamente la hoja más grande y la examinó con aire meditabundo mientras deslizaba un dedo a lo largo.

—A Spouncer le dejé el ojo morado, ¿sabes? Eso es lo que le pasó por intentar pegarme: no pensaba ir a medias, por mucho que me pegara.

—Oh, qué valiente eres Tom. Me parece que eres como Sansón. Si se me acercara un león rugiendo, seguro que luchabas contra él, ¿verdad, Tom?

—Pero tonta, ¿cómo te va a atacar un león rugiendo? Sólo hay leones en los circos.

—No, pero imagina que estamos en algún país con leones, en África, donde hace mucho calor: allí los leones se comen a la gente. Puedo enseñarte el libro donde lo he leído.

—Bueno, pues cojo una escopeta y lo mato.

—Pero ¿y si no tienes ninguna escopeta…? Imagina que salimos sin pensar, como cuando nos vamos a pescar, y entonces un león muy grande corre hacia nosotros rugiendo y no podemos escapar. ¿Qué haces, Tom?

Tom, calló un momento y, finalmente, se dio media vuelta y se alejó con desdén.

—Si no hay ningún león, ¿para qué sirve hablar de eso?

—Es que me gusta imaginármelo —insistió Maggie, yendo tras él—. Imagina lo que harías, Tom.

—No me des la lata, Maggie. Qué pesada eres. Me voy a ver los conejos. El corazón de Maggie latió asustado. No se atrevió a decirle la verdad, pero caminó detrás de Tom en un silencio tembloroso, pensando en cómo podría darle la noticia de modo que le aplacara la pena y el enfado. Maggie temía la rabia de Tom más que ninguna otra cosa: era muy distinta de la suya.

—Tom —dijo tímidamente cuando se encontraban ya en el exterior de la casa—. ¿Cuánto te costaron los conejos?

—Dos medias coronas y seis peniques —contestó Tom al instante.

—Me parece que tengo mucho más que eso en mi portamonedas. Le diré a mamá que te lo dé.

—¿Para qué? —preguntó Tom—. No quiero tu dinero, tonta. Tengo mucho más dinero que tú porque soy un chico. En Navidades siempre me dan monedas de medio soberano o de un soberano, porque yo seré un hombre. Y a ti sólo te dan monedas de cinco chelines, porque sólo eres una niña.

—Bueno, es que… Tom, ¿y si madre me dejara darte dos medias coronas y seis peniques para que te las gastaras… en más conejos?

—¿Más conejos? No quiero tener más.

—¡Es que se han muerto todos, Tom!

Tom se detuvo de inmediato y se volvió hacia Maggie.

—Te has olvidado de darles de comer. Y a Harry también se le ha olvidado —afirmó. Durante unos instantes, su rostro se puso colorado—. Se las va a cargar: haré que lo echen. Y no te quiero, Maggie. Mañana no vendrás a pescar conmigo. Te dije que fueras a verlos cada día —añadió, y se puso de nuevo en marcha.

—Sí, pero se me olvidó. No pude remediarlo, de verdad, Tom, Lo siento muchísimo —dijo Maggie, mientras le saltaban las lágrimas de los ojos.

—Eres una niña mala —regañó Tom con severidad—. Y siento haberte comprado el sedal. Ya no te quiero.

—Oh, Tom, no seas tan cruel —sollozó Maggie—. Si se te olvidara algo, yo te perdonaría. Fuera lo que fuera, te perdonaría y te querría.

—Sí, tú eres tonta. Pero a mí nunca se me olvida nada.

—Por favor, perdóname, Tom. Me da muchísima pena —suplicó Maggie, agitándose con los sollozos mientras agarraba el brazo de Tom y le apoyaba la mejilla mojada en el hombro.

Tom se la sacudió y se detuvo.

—Escucha, Maggie: ¿soy un buen hermano? —preguntó en tono imperioso.

—Ss-sí —hipó Maggie con la barbilla tembloroso.

—¿No es verdad que he pensado en tu sedal durante todo este trimestre, he querido comprártelo, he ahorrado dinero, no he querido pagar a medias los *toffees* y Spouncer me ha pegado?

—Ss-sí… y yo… te quiero mucho, Tom.

—Pero tú eres una niña mala. Durante las últimas vacaciones, chupaste la pintura de mi caja de caramelos, y en las anteriores dejaste que la barca arrastrara mi sedal, aunque *t'*había pedido que lo vigilaras, y me rompiste la cometa con la cabeza sin motivo.

—Pero si no lo hice queriendo —contestó Maggie—: es que no lo pude evitar.

—Sí, sí podías —replicó Tom—: bastaba con que te fijaras en lo que hacías. Y como eres una niña mala, no vendrás mañana a pescar conmigo.

Con esta terrible conclusión, Tom se alejó corriendo de Maggie hacia el molino con intención de saludar a Luke y quejarse de Harry.

Maggie permaneció inmóvil unos minutos, agitada tan solo por sus sollozos; después dio media vuelta, corrió hacia la casa y subió al desván, donde se sentó en el suelo y apoyó la cabeza contra un carcomido estante, sintiéndose terriblemente desgraciada. Después de pensar tanto tiempo en lo feliz que sería cuando llegara Tom, ahora estaba él en casa y se portaba con ella con tanta crueldad. ¿Qué le importaba todo lo demás si Tom no la

quería? ¡Era muy cruel! ¿No le había ofrecido el dinero y le había dicho que lo sentía mucho? Sabía que muchas veces se portaba mal con su madre, pero nunca con Tom y nunca le había pasado por la cabeza hacerle alguna travesura.

—¡Qué malo es conmigo! —sollozó Maggie en voz alta, sintiendo un desolado placer en la resonancia del gran desván vacío. Ni se le ocurrió pegar o atormentar al fetiche: se sentía demasiado desgraciada para estar enfadada.

¡Triste pena la de la infancia, cuando la pena es nueva y extraña, cuando la esperanza todavía no tiene alas para volar más allá de los días y las semanas, y el espacio entre un verano y otro parece inconmensurable!

No tardó en tener la sensación de que llevaba mucho rato en el desván y debía de ser ya la hora del té: todos estarían merendando sin pensar en ella. Pues bien, se quedaría allí y se moriría de hambre, se escondería detrás de la tina y se quedaría allí durante toda la noche. Entonces todos se asustarían y Tom lo sentiría mucho. Maggie, con el corazón lleno de orgullo, se entretuvo con estos pensamientos mientras se deslizaba sigilosamente detrás de la tina; pero allí volvió a echarse a llorar al pensar en que a nadie le importaba su paradero. Y si bajaba a ver a Tom, ¿la perdonaría? Quizá estuviera su padre y se pusiera de su parte. Pero ella quería que Tom la perdonara porque la quería y no porque se lo dijera su padre. No, no volvería a bajar hasta que Tom subiera a buscarla. Esta decisión se mantuvo firme durante los cinco oscuros minutos pasados tras la tina; pero la necesidad de que la quisieran, la más intensa en la pobre Maggie, se enfrentó a su orgullo y no tardó en vencerlo. Salió de detrás de la tina a la penumbra del largo desván y, en ese momento, oyó unos pasos rápidos en las escaleras.

Tom había estado demasiado interesado charlando con Luke y rondando por las instalaciones del molino, entrando y saliendo a su gusto y tallando palos —por el mero motivo de que en el colegio no le estaba permitido— para pensar en Maggie y en el efecto que su rabia había causado en ella. Había querido castigarla y, después de hacerlo, se ocupó en otras cosas, como haría cualquier persona práctica. Sin embargo, después de que lo llamaran para tomar el té, su padre preguntó:

—¡Caramba! ¿Dónde está la mocita?

—¿Dónde está tu hermanita? —exclamó, casi en el mismo instante, la señora Tulliver.

Ambos suponían que Maggie y Tom habían pasado la tarde juntos.

—No lo sé —contestó Tom. No quería delatar a Maggie, aunque estaba enfadado con ella, porque Tom Tulliver era un hombre de honor.

—¡Cómo! ¿No ha estado jugando contigo durante todo este rato? —preguntó el padre—. Si ella no pensaba en nada más que en que volvieras a casa.

—No la he visto en estas dos horas —dijo Tom, empezando a comer *plumcake*.

—¡Cielo santo! ¡Se ha ahogado! —gritó la señora Tulliver, poniéndose en pie y corriendo hacia la ventana—. ¿Cómo has podido permitirlo? —añadió, convirtiéndose en una mujer asustada que acusaba a no sabía quién de no sabía qué.

—¡Ca! No se ha ahogado —dijo el señor Tulliver—. *T'*has portado mal con ella, ¿verdad, Tom?

—Le aseguro que no, padre —contestó Tom indignado—. Me parece que está en casa.

—A lo mejor está en el desván —sugirió la señora Tulliver—, canturreando y hablando sola, sin acordarse de las horas de las comidas.

—Ve a buscarla, Tom —ordenó el señor Tulliver con severidad.

Su perspicacia o tal vez la debilidad que sentía por Maggie le hacían sospechar que el muchacho habría ofendido «a la nen», porque, de no ser así, ella nunca se habría alejado de él.

—Y pórtate bien con ella, ¿me oyes? Si no, te vas a enterar.

Tom nunca desobedecía a su padre, porque el señor Tulliver era un hombre autoritario y, tal como él decía, no estaba dispuesto a permitir que nadie le quitara el bastón de mando; pero se alejó con semblante hosco, llevando consigo el trozo de pastel y sin la menor intención de evitar a Maggie su bien merecido castigo. Tom sólo tenía trece años y no poseía criterio alguno sobre cuestiones de gramática o de aritmética, pero sabía perfectamente que estaba dispuesto a castigar a quien lo mereciera de la

misma manera que aceptaba que lo castigaran si le estaba bien empleado; aunque, en realidad, él nunca fuera acreedor a un castigo.

Así pues, eran de Tom los pasos que Maggie había oído en las escaleras cuando su necesidad de amor se imponía sobre su orgullo, y en aquel momento se preparaba para bajar y pedir perdón con los ojos hinchados y el cabello alborotado. Al menos su padre le acariciaría la cabeza y diría: «No importa, mocit». Esta necesidad de amor, este anhelo del corazón actúa como un déspota excelente, con una autoridad similar a esa otra hambre mediante la cual la Naturaleza nos obliga a someternos al yugo y cambiar el rostro del mundo.

Maggie reconoció los pasos de Tom y el corazón empezó a latirle con violencia, con la repentina emoción de la esperanza. Tom se limitó a detenerse en lo alto de la escalera.

—Maggie, tienes que bajar —anunció.

Pero Maggie corrió hacia él y se le colgó del cuello, llorando.

—Tom, por favor, perdóname. No puedo aguantarlo… Me portaré siempre bien… Me acordaré de todo… Quiéreme, por favor, querido Tom.

A medida que crecemos, aprendemos a controlar los sentimientos. Después de una pelea, nos mantenemos a cierta distancia, nos expresamos con frases educadas y, así, conservamos una separación digna mientras mostramos firmeza, por un lado, y nos tragamos la pena por otro. Nuestra conducta ya no se asemeja a la de los animales inferiores, sino que nos comportamos en todos los sentidos como miembros de una sociedad altamente civilizada. Maggie y Tom todavía eran como animales jóvenes, y por ello Maggie podía frotar la mejilla contra la de Tom y besarlo en la oreja, entre sollozos; y el muchacho poseía fibras tiernas acostumbradas a responder a los mimos de Maggie, de modo que reaccionó con una debilidad incoherente con su decisión de castigarla tanto como merecía.

—No llores, Maggie. Ten, un poco de pastel —dijo, devolviéndole los besos.

El llanto de Maggie empezó a apaciguarse, abrió la boca y mordió un poco de pastel; después Tom mordió otro trocito, para acompañarla, y comieron juntos, se frotaron las mejillas, las cejas, la nariz mientras comían, con un humillante parecido a los ponis en una expresión de cariño.

—Vamos, Maggie: ven a tomar el té —dijo finalmente Tom, cuando ya no quedaba más pastel que el del salón.

Así terminaron las penas aquel día, y a la mañana siguiente Maggie trotaba con su caña de pescar en una mano y un asa del cesto en la otra, poniendo siempre los pies, gracias a un don especial, en los lugares con más barro, oscura y radiante bajo el gorrito de castor, porque Tom era bueno con ella. No obstante, había pedido a Tom que de pusiera él el cebo, aunque aceptó su palabra cuando de aseguró que los gusanos no sentían nada (aunque Tom pensaba que, si algo sentían, a él de daba lo mismo). Tom lo sabía todo sobre los gusanos, los peces y cosas de esas; qué pájaros eran nocivos, cómo se abrían los candados o en qué sentido había que levantar los cierres de las puertas de las verjas. Maggie creía que estos conocimientos eran maravillosos y que era mucho más difícil recordarlos que lo leído en los libros; reverenciaba la superioridad de Tom porque era la única persona que llamaba «cuento» a sus conocimientos y no parecía sorprenderse de lo lista que era. En realidad, Tom opinaba que Maggie era tonta, como todas las niñas: eran incapaces de dar en un blanco de una pedrada, de sacar partido a una navaja y se asustaban con las ranas. Con todo, sentía mucho cariño por su hermana, pensaba cuidar siempre de ella, convertirla en su ama de llaves y castigarla cuando se portara mal.

Caminaron hacia la Laguna Redonda, un maravilloso estanque formado mucho tiempo atrás por las inundaciones. Nadie sabía qué profundidad tenía y resultaba misteriosa su forma casi circular, enmarcada por sauces y altas cañas, de modo que el agua sólo se veía desde muy cerca de la orilla. La vista de aquel lugar favorito siempre ponía a Tom de muy buen humor y, mientras abría la preciada cesta y preparaba el aparejo, habló a Maggie con susurros cómplices. Le lanzó el sedal y de puso la caña en la mano. Maggie pensaba que lo más probable era que los peces pequeños acudieran a su anzuelo y los grandes al de Tom pero, cuando se había olvidado ya delos peces y contemplaba soñadora las aguas cristalinas, Tom le susurró lo más fuerte que pudo:

—¡Mira, mira! ¡Maggie!, y se acercó corriendo para impedir que tirara bruscamente del sedal.

Maggie se asustó al pensar que había hecho algo mal, como de costumbre, pero Tom tiró del hilo y sacó una gran tenca que se puso a saltar sobre la hierba.

Tom estaba entusiasmado.

—¡Maggie, bonita! ¡Vacía la cesta!

Maggie no creía que aquello tuviera un mérito especial, pero de bastaba con que Tom la llamara Maggie y estuviera contento con ella. Nada en los susurros y los silencios evocadores podía estropear el placer de escuchar el suave goteo del pez al salir del agua y el leve rumor; como si los sauces, las cañas y el agua también se comunicaran con murmullos. Maggie pensó que el cielo podría ser así: estar sentada junto al estanque y que nadie la regañara nunca. A pesar de que le gustaba mucho ir de pesca, nunca se daba cuenta de que había picado un pez hasta que Tom se lo advertía.

Aquella fue una de sus mañanas felices. Trotaron por ahí y se sentaron juntos sin pensar en que la vida pudiera cambiar mucho para ellos: se limitarían a crecer, a dejar el colegio y todo sería siempre como en vacaciones; vivirían siempre juntos y se querrían mucho. Todo sería siempre igual: el molino con su estruendo; el gran castaño, bajo el cual jugaban a casitas; el Ripple, su pequeño río particular, cuyas orillas eran como su casa, en las que Tom buscaba siempre ratas de agua mientras Maggie recogía los plumeros purpúreos de las cañas, que después olvidaba y dejaba tirados; y, por encima de todo, el gran Floss a lo largo del cual vagaban con sensación de aventura, para ver cómo la marea de primavera —el terrible macareo— se alzaba cual un monstruo hambriento, o para visitar el Gran Fresno, que una vez gimió y gruñó como un hombre. Tom pensaba que todos los que vivían en otro lugar del mundo tenían peor suerte, y Maggie, cuando leía que Cristiana[3] cruzaba «el río sobre el que no hay puent» siempre veía el Floss entre prados verdes, junto ad Gran Fresno.

La vida cambió mucho para Tom y Maggie y, sin embargo, no se equivocaban entonces al creer que los pensamientos y amores de aquellos primeros años formarían siempre parte de su vida. No podríamos amar tanto la tierra si no hubiéramos vivido en ella nuestra infancia, si no fuera la misma tierra donde cada primavera crecían las mismas flores que

recogíamos con nuestros dedos diminutos, sentados en la hierba, balbuceando… Los mismos escaramujos y espinos en los setos en otoño… Los mismos petirrojos que llamábamos «pájaros de Dio» porque no dañaban las preciosas cosechas. ¿Qué novedad puede compararse a esta dulce monotonía en la que todo se conoce y se ama, precisamente porque se conoce?

En este templado día de mayo camino por un bosque, los brotes ocres de los robles se extienden sobre mí, bajo el cielo azul, y a mis pies crecen las blancas margaritas, las azules verónicas y la hiedra. ¿Qué bosque de palmeras tropicales, qué extraños helechos o espléndidas flores de grandes pétalos podrían hacer vibrar fibras tan profundas y delicadas como esta escena familiar? Estas flores conocidas, estos trinos que tan bien recuerdo, este cielo de brillo cambiante, estos campos arados, cubiertos de hierba, cada uno de ellos con la distinta personalidad que le confieren los caprichosos setos… Todas estas cosas son la lengua materna de nuestra imaginación, el idioma cargado con todas las asociaciones sutiles e inextricables que las horas fugaces de nuestra infancia dejaron atrás. El placer que sentimos hoy al contemplar el brillo del sol sobre las largas briznas de hierba podría ser tan solo la débil percepción de un alma cansada, si no fuera por los rayos de sol y la hierba de los años lejanos, que perviven en nosotros y transforman nuestra percepción en amor.

Capítulo VI

Se aguarda la visita de las tías y los tíos

Se encontraban en la semana de Pascua y los pasteles de queso de la señora Tulliver eran más exquisitamente ligeros que de costumbre.

—Un golpe de viento se los llevaría como plumas —decía Kezia, la criada, orgullosa de servir a una señora capaz de elaborar semejantes pastelillos. De modo que ninguna otra estación o circunstancia podrían haber sido más propicias para celebrar una fiesta familiar, aún cuando no se considerara procedente consultar a la hermana Glegg y a la hermana Pullet sobre la estancia de Tom en la escuela.

—Preferiría no invitar a mi hermana Deane esta vez —confesó la señora Tulliver—: es celosa y posesiva como el que más y siempre está intentando dejar en mal lugar a mis pobres niños delante de los tíos y tías.

—No, invita a los Deane —opinó el señor Tulliver—. Casi nunca hablo con él: hace por lo menos seis meses que no viene. ¿Qué importa lo que diga ella? Mis niños no necesitan que los contemplen.

—Eso es lo que tú siempre dices, Tulliver; pero estoy segura de que no hay nadie en tu familia, ni tía ni tío, que les vaya a dejar un billete de cinco libras en el *testamiento*. Mi hermana Glegg, y mi hermana Pullet lo mismo, ahorran ni se sabe cuánto dinero, ya que guardan todos sus intereses y parte del dinero de la casa, porque sus maridos les compran de todo —la señora Tulliver era una mujer dulce, pero incluso una oveja aprende a plantar cara cuando tiene corderos.

—¡Bah! —exclamó el señor Tulliver—. Cuando hay tantos a la mesa, mucho pan resulta escaso. ¿Qué importa el dinero de tus hermanas si tienen que dividirlo entre media docena de sobrinos y sobrinas? Y a tu hermana Deane no se le ocurrirá pretender que se lo dejen todo a uno solo y todo el mundo la critique después de muertos.

—No sé qué pretenderá —dijo la señora Tulliver—, ya que mis hijos se muestran muy poco amables con sus tías y tíos. Cuando vienen, Maggie es diez veces más traviesa que otros días, y a Tom no le caen bien, criatura, aunque es más natural en un chico que en una niña. Y Lucy, la hija de los Deane, es tan buena… puedes sentarla en un taburete y ahí se queda una hora, sin pedir para bajar. No puedo evitar quererla como si fuera mía, y estoy segura de que parece más hija mía que de mi hermana, porque si hay alguien en mi familia que tenga mal color, esa es Deane.

—Bueno, bueno: si tanto quieres a la niña, invita a su padre y a su madre a que la traigan. ¿Y por qué no se lo dices también a la tía y el tío Moss? ¿Y a algunos de sus hijos?

—Pero Tulliver: ya somos ocho personas mayores más los niños, y tendría que poner dos alas en la mesa y sacar más vajilla. Y sabes tan bien como yo que mis hermanas y tu hermana no congenian.

—Bueno, bueno, haz lo que quieras, Bessy —dijo el señor Tulliver, cogiendo el sombrero y saliendo hacia el molino.

Pocas esposas eran tan sumisas como la señora Tulliver en todos los aspectos que no estuvieran relacionados con sus parientes; pero de soltera había sido una señorita Dodson, y los Dodson eran una familia muy respetable, considerada como la que más en su propia parroquia o la vecina. Las señoritas Dodson habían aprendido a llevar la cabeza bien alta, y a nadie le sorprendió que las dos mayores hicieran tan buenas bodas, aunque no muy jóvenes, porque no era esa la costumbre de la familia Dodson. En aquella familia todo se hacía de una manera especial: blanquear la ropa, preparar vino de prímula, curar el jamón o guardar las grosellas en conserva, de manera que ninguna de las hijas de la casa pudiera ser indiferente al privilegio de haber nacido Dodson en lugar de Gibson o Watson. En la familia Dodson, los funerales se celebraban siempre con especial decoro: las cintas de los sombreros nunca eran azuladas, los

guantes jamás tenían el pulgar descosido, todos se comportaban debidamente y siempre había bandas negras para los portadores del féretro. Cuando un miembro de la familia tenía algún problema o enfermedad, los demás acudían a visitar al infortunado, por lo general, al mismo tiempo, y no rehuían decirle las verdades más desagradables que les dictaba su correcto sentido de la familia: si la enfermedad o el conflicto era culpa del afectado, no era costumbre de los Dodson quedarse callados. En definitiva, en esa familia se daba una tradición especial que dictaba lo que era correcto en la organización de la casa y en la vida social, y la única vertiente amarga de esta superioridad era la dolorosa incapacidad para aprobar los condimentos. O la conducta de las familias en las que no regía la tradición de los Dodson. Cuando una Dodson se encontraba en una «casa ajen», siempre tomaba el té con pan solo y rechazaba todo tipo de conservas, ya que no confiaba en la calidad de la mantequilla y sospechaba que las mermeladas podían haber empezado a fermentar por falta de azúcar y de hervor. Aunque reconocían que algunos Dodson se parecían más a la familia y otros menos, en la medida en que eran «del mismo linaj», sin duda eran mejores que los que no formaban parte de ella. Y cabe destacar que, si bien ningún Dodson estaba satisfecho de ningún otro Dodson individualmente, sí lo estaba consigo mismo y con el conjunto de los Dodson. El miembro más débil de una familia —el que tiene menos carácter— es con frecuencia el mero epítome de las costumbres y tradiciones de la familia, y la señora Tulliver era una perfecta Dodson, aunque débil, de la misma manera que una cerveza, por floja que sea, no deja de ser cerveza. Y aunque en su juventud protestó un poco al verse sometida al yugo de sus hermanas mayores y todavía vertía lágrimas de vez en cuando ante los reproches de sus hermanas, no era intención de la señora Tulliver introducir innovaciones en las ideas familiares: estaba agradecida por ser una Dodson y por tener un hijo que había salido a su propia familia, por lo menos en los rasgos y en la tez, y en el gusto por la sal y las judías, algo impropio de los Tulliver.

En otros aspectos, el verdadero carácter Dodson se hallaba latente en Tom y éste, igual que Maggie, distaba de valorar el «linaj» materno; por lo general, en cuanto sabía con tiempo suficiente que las tías y tíos los

visitarían, se fugaba durante todo el día con gran cantidad de comida fácil de transportar: síntoma moral que permitía a la tía Glegg presagiarle el más negro porvenir. Maggie tenía que soportar que Tom se fugara sin avisarla, pero ya se sabe que el sexo débil constituye una pesada impedimenta en casos de huida.

El miércoles, víspera de la visita de los tíos y las tías, los diversos aromas de pasteles en el horno y jaleas calientes mezclados con el olor a salsa de carne resultaban tan tentadores que era imposible sentirse triste: la esperanza flotaba en el aire. Tom y Maggie hicieron varias incursiones a la cocina y, al igual que a otros merodeadores, sólo consintieron mantenerse a cierta distancia cuando se les permitió obtener un botín suficiente.

—Tom —preguntó Maggie cuando se sentaron en las ramas del viejo árbol, comiendo pastelitos rellenos de mermelada—, ¿piensas escaparte mañana?

—No —contestó Tom lentamente tras terminar un bollo y mirando de reojo el tercero, que debían compartir—. No, no me iré.

—¿Por qué, Tom? ¿Porque viene Lucy?

—No —contestó Tom, abriendo la navaja y sosteniéndola sobre el bollo, con la cabeza ladeada en un gesto de duda. (Era un problema difícil dividir aquel polígono tan irregular en dos partes iguales).

—¿Y a mí qué me importa Lucy? Si es una niña: no sabe jugar al *bandy*[4].

—Entonces, ¿es por el bizcocho borracho? —preguntó Maggie, intentando adivinarlo mientras se inclinaba hacia Tom con los ojos clavados en la navaja suspendida en el aire.

—No, tonta: también está bueno al día siguiente. Es por el pudín. Ya sé de qué será: de albaricoque. ¡Vaya!

Con esta exclamación, la navaja descendió sobre el pastel y lo partió, pero el resultado no fue del agrado de Tom, que siguió contemplando las dos mitades con aire indeciso.

—Cierra los ojos, Maggie —dijo finalmente.

—¿Para qué?

—No te importa. Ciérralos cuando yo te diga.

Maggie obedeció.

Ahora dime cuál quieres, el izquierdo o el derecho.

—Quiero el que se le ha caído la mermelada —dijo Maggie, manteniendo los ojos cerrados para complacer a Tom.

—¡Anda! Seguro que no quieres ese, boba. Te lo comes si te toca, pero no te lo daré porque sí. Escoge: el de la izquierda o el de la derecha. ¡Eh! —exclamó Tom enfadado, al ver que Maggie abría un poco los ojos—. Si no cierras los ojos no tendrás ningún trozo.

El espíritu de sacrificio de Maggie no llegaba a tanto; en realidad, temo que no le importaba tanto que Tom obtuviera el mayor pedazo como que estuviera contento con ella por darle el mejor. De modo que cerró los ojos con fuerza hasta que Tom le ordenó:

—¡Escoge!

—El de la izquierda —contestó ella.

—Te lo llevas —contestó Tom con fastidio.

—¿Cuál? ¿El que tiene la mermelada fuera?

—No, el otro: tómalo —dijo Tom con firmeza, tendiéndole a Maggie el mejor.

—Por favor, Tom: quédatelo. A mí me da igual. Prefiero el otro, quédate este.

—No, no quiero —contestó Tom, casi enfadado, empezando a comer el suyo.

Maggie, pensando que no merecía la pena seguir discutiendo, empezó también a comer con tanto deleite como urgencia. Pero Tom, dispuesto a comer más, terminó primero y tuvo que contemplar cómo Maggie devoraba los últimos bocados. Maggie no se daba cuenta de que Tom la miraba: se balanceaba en la rama vieja, absorta en una vaga sensación de mermelada e indolencia.

—¡Glotona! —exclamó Tom después de que se tragara el último bocado. Él era consciente de haberse comportado con justicia y le parecía que ella debería haberlo tenido en cuenta y premiarlo. Antes de comerse su parte habría rechazado un bocado, pero uno cambia de opinión cuando su parte ha desaparecido.

Maggie palideció.

—Tom, ¿por qué no me has pedido, si querías?

—Ni se me habría ocurrido pedírtelo, glotona. Deberías haber pensado en mí, sobre todo cuando sabías que *t'* había dado el mejor.

—Pero si yo quería dártelo, ya lo sabes —contestó Maggie ofendida.

—Sí, pero yo no quería hacer lo que no era justo, como Spouncer. Siempre se queda con el mejor trozo si no se lo quitas a puñetazos, y si escoges el mejor con los ojos cerrados, lo cambia de mano. Cuando parto, una cosa, lo hago con justicia, pero yo no soy un tragón.

Con esta hiriente insinuación, Tom saltó de la rama y lanzó una piedra con un grito para mimar un poco a Yap, que, mientras desaparecían los dulces, también había estado mirando con una agitación de orejas y emociones difíciles de soportar sin amargura. Sin embargo, el excelente perro aceptó la atención de Tom con tanta presteza como si lo hubieran tratado con generosidad.

Pero Maggie, dotada con la capacidad para sufrir que distingue al ser humano y lo coloca a orgullosa distancia del más melancólico chimpancé, siguió sentada en la rama, entregada a la viva sensación de haber recibido reproches injustos. Habría dado el mundo entero por no haberse comido todo el bollo y haberle guardado un poco a Tom. El pastelito estaba muy bueno y el paladar de Maggie lo apreciaba debidamente, pero habría preferido quedarse sin él varias veces antes de que Tom la llamara glotona y se enfadara con ella. Él había dicho que no lo quería y ella se lo comió sin pensar, ¿cómo no iba a hacerlo? Durante los diez minutos siguientes, los ojos se le llenaron de tantas lágrimas que no vio nada; pasado ese tiempo, el disgusto cedió ante el deseo de reconciliación y la niña saltó de la rama para ir en busca de Tom. Ya no estaba en el prado, detrás del almiar. ¿Adónde habría ido, acompañado de Yap? Maggie corrió hacia la alta orilla situada junto al gran acebo, donde podía distinguir el Floss a lo lejos. Allí estaba Tom, pero el corazón le dio un vuelco al ver lo mucho que se había alejado por el camino hacia el gran río, y que no sólo lo acompañaba Yap, sino también el travieso Bob Jakin, que en aquel momento no se dedicaba a su función oficial —o tal vez natural—, que consistía en ahuyentar a los pájaros. Maggie estaba segura de que Bob era malo, aunque no sabía bien por qué: tal vez se debía a que la madre de Bob era una mujer gorda y horriblemente corpulenta que vivía en una rara casa redonda, río abajo, y a

que una vez que Maggie y Tom llegaron paseando hasta allí, salió de la casa un perro manchado que no paraba de ladrar; cuando la madre de Bob surgió tras él y gritó por encima de los ladridos para decirles que no se asustaran, Maggie pensó que los estaba regañando severamente y el corazón le latió aterrorizado. Maggie creía probable que la casa redonda tuviera serpientes en el suelo y murciélagos en el dormitorio: en una ocasión vio cómo Bob se quitaba la gorra para enseñar a Tom la pequeña serpiente que llevaba dentro y en otra les mostró un puñado de murciélagos pequeños. En conjunto, era un chico raro, tal vez un poco diabólico, a juzgar por la familiaridad que tenía con serpientes y murciélagos. Y, por si todo esto fuera poco, cuando Tom tenía a Bob de compañero se desentendía de Maggie y no le permitía ir con ellos.

Debemos reconocer que Tom disfrutaba con la compañía de Bob, ¿cómo iba a ser de otro modo? En cuanto veía el huevo de un pájaro, Bob sabía si era de golondrina, de herrerillo o de escribano cerillo; encontraba todos los avisperos y era capaz de preparar todo tipo de trampas; trepaba por los árboles como si fuera una ardilla y tenía una capacidad mágica para localizar erizos y armiños. Además, poseía el valor necesario para hacer travesuras tales como abrir brechas en los setos, tirar piedras a las ovejas o matar algún gato que merodeaba «de incógnit». Tantas cualidades en un inferior —al que podía tratar con autoridad a pesar de sus mayores conocimientos— ejercían una fascinación fatal sobre Tom; y Maggie estaba segura de que, en cada período vacacional, tendría algunos días de pena porque Tom se había marchado con Bob.

¡En fin! No había remedio: se había ido y a Maggie no se le ocurría mejor consuelo que sentarse junto al acebo o pasear junto al seto, imaginando que todo era distinto, dando forma a su pequeño mundo tal como le gustaría que fuera.

La vida de Maggie era turbulenta y éste era su opio.

Entretanto, Tom, olvidando todo lo relacionado con Maggie y el aguijón de reproche que acababa de clavarle en el corazón, caminaba apresuradamente con Bob, al que había encontrado por casualidad, en dirección a la gran cacería de ratas que iba a tener lugar en un granero cercano. Bob lo sabía todo sobre el tema y hablaba de la diversión con un

entusiasmo que nadie, a menos que carezca de sentimientos viriles o ignore lamentablemente el mecanismo de la caza de ratas, puede dejar de imaginar. A pesar de la maldad sobrenatural que se le atribuía, Bob no tenía un aspecto excesivamente infame; su rostro de nariz respingona y la franja de cabello rojo muy rizado resultaban incluso agradables. Llevaba siempre los pantalones recogidos hasta la rodilla para poder meterse en el agua al instante y su virtud, suponiendo que ésta existiera, era sin duda una «virtud vestida con harapo». Según la autoridad de los filósofos, incluso los más biliosos, que piensan que todo mérito bien presentado recibe excesiva recompensa, es muy probable que este tipo de virtud no obtenga reconocimiento alguno (tal vez porque pocas veces se repara en ella).

—Conozco al hombre que tiene los hurones —declaró Bob con ronca voz atiplada mientras caminaba arrastrando los pies con los azules ojos fijos en el río, como un animal anfibio que aguardara el momento oportuno para lanzarse al agua—. Vive más arriba del Kennel Yard, en Saint Ogg's, allí vive. Es el mejor cazarratas que existe, vaya que sí. Es lo que más me gustaría ser, vaya que sí. Los topos no son nada en comparación. Pero *ties* que tener hurones, los perros no sirven. Vaya, este perro —prosiguió Bob, señalando a Yap con aire de desagrado—: no vale *pa* las ratas ni *pa na*. Ya lo vi en la caza de ratas del cobertizo de su padre.

Yap, percibiendo el desdén, se acercó a Tom con el rabo entre piernas; éste se sintió un poco dolido por él, pero no tuvo el valor sobrehumano necesario para quedarse atrás en el desprecio de un perro tan lamentable.

—No, no —dijo—. Yap no sirve para cazar. Cuando termine el colegio tendré perros buenos para las ratas y todo lo demás.

—Mejor los hurones, señorito Tom —dijo Bob con entusiasmo—. Hurones blancos con ojos de color de rosa. ¡Vaya! Podrá cazar sus propias ratas, y podrá poner una rata en una jaula con un hurón y mirar cómo luchan, vaya que sí. Yo pienso hacerlo. Y es casi tan divertido como ver cómo se pelean dos chicos, como los que vendían pasteles y naranjas en la feria: las cosas salían volando de las cestas y algunos de los pasteles se chafaron… pero estaban igual de buenos —añadió Bob, a modo de nota o apostilla, tras una breve pausa.

—Pero Bob —objetó Tom con aire pensativo—, los hurones son bichos desagradables que muerden a cualquiera, aunque no se les moleste.

—Caray, ahí está lo bueno. Si alguien se queda con tu hurón, no tardará en darle un buen bocado, vaya que sí.

En aquel momento, un llamativo incidente hizo que los chicos se detuvieran en seco: un cuerpo pequeño había caído al agua entre las cercanas totoras. Bob insinuó que, si no era una rata de agua, estaba dispuesto a soportar las más desagradables consecuencias.

—¡Allí, Yap, allí! —gritó Tom batiendo palmas mientras el pequeño hocico negro describía un arco hacia la orilla opuesta—. ¡Cógela, cógela!

Yap agitó las orejas y arrugó la frente, pero se negó a lanzarse al agua e intentó que unos ladridos cumplieran el mismo propósito.

—¡Eh, cobarde! —dijo Tom, dándole una patada, sintiéndose humillado en su espíritu de cazador por poseer un animal tan pusilánime. Bob se abstuvo de todo comentario y avanzó aunque, para variar, prefirió caminar por la orilla inundada y poco profunda.

—Ahora no está tan lleno, el Floss —dijo Bob mientras propinaba una patada al agua con la agradable sensación de mostrarse insolente con el río —. Vaya, el año pasado todos los prados eran cono una sábana de agua, vaya que sí.

—Sí, pero una vez —objetó Tom, dispuesto a ver una oposición entre dos afirmaciones que, en realidad, coincidían— hubo una inundación y se formó la Laguna Redonda. Lo sé porque me lo ha contado mi padre. Y se ahogaron las ovejas y las vacas, y las barcas se quedaron sobre los campos.

—Me da igual si hay una inundación —contestó Bob—, me da igual estar en el agua o en la tierra. Nadaría, vaya que sí.

—¿Y si no tienes nada que comer durante mucho tiempo? —preguntó Tom, cuya imaginación se había disparado bajo el estímulo de la amenaza —. Cuando sea mayor, construiré un barco con una casa de madera encima, como el arca de Noé, y la tendré llena de comida, conejos y otras cosas. Y si llega una inundación, me dará lo mismo… Y si te veo por ahí nadando, te dejaré subir —añadió en tono de patrón benévolo.

—No *m'*asusta —dijo Bob, a quien el hambre no alarmaba tanto—, pero subiré y sacrificaré a los conejos con un porrazo en la cabeza cuando usted

quiera comérselos.

—Y si tenemos medio penique, jugaremos a adivinar si cae cara o cruz —dijo Tom, sin pensar en la posibilidad de que este juego resultara menos atractivo en su madurez—. Empezaría repartiendo las monedas y veríamos quién ganaba.

—Aquí tengo medio penique —anunció Bob, orgulloso, saliendo del agua y lanzando al aire la moneda—. ¿Cara o cruz?

—Cruz —dijo Tom, enardecido al instante por el deseo de ganar.

—Pues es cara —contestó Bob rápidamente, agarrando la moneda al caer.

—No lo era —gritó Tom imperiosamente—. Dame el medio penique, lo he ganado justamente.

—No pienso dárselo —dijo Bob, metiendo la mano en el bolsillo.

—Entonces haré que me lo des a la fuerza —dijo Tom.

—No puede hacer que le dé nada, no puede —contestó Bob.

—Sí, sí puedo.

—No, no puede.

—Yo soy el amo.

—A mí qué me importa.

—Ya verás cómo *t'*importa, tramposo —dijo Tom, agarrando a Bob por el cuello y sacudiéndolo.

—Suélteme —dijo Bob, propinándole una patada.

A Tom se le subió la sangre a la cabeza: arremetió contra Bob y lo derribó, pero éste lo agarró como un gato y lo arrastró consigo. Lucharon unos momentos en el suelo hasta que Tom, sujetando a Bob contra la tierra por los hombros, creyó que dominaba la situación.

—Di que vas a darme el medio penique ahora mismo —dijo Tom con dificultad mientras se esforzaba por sujetar los brazos de Bob.

Pero en ese momento, Yap, que había estado corriendo delante de los niños, regresó ladrando al escenario de la acción y vio una oportunidad favorable para morder la pierna desnuda de Bob, no sólo con impunidad, sino también con honor. El dolor producido por los dientes de Yap, en lugar de sorprender a Bob y hacerle soltar a su contrario, le dio mayor tenacidad y, con un nuevo esfuerzo, tiró a Tom de un empujón y se colocó encima. Sin

embargo, Yap, que no había conseguido presa suficiente, clavó los dientes en otro lugar, de modo que Bob, acosado, soltó a Tom, agarró a Yap hasta casi estrangularlo y lo tiró al río. En ese momento, Tom estaba ya de pie y, antes de que Bob hubiera recuperado el equilibrio tras lanzar a Yap, se le echó encima, lo tiró al suelo y le clavó la rodilla sobre el pecho.

—Ahora me das el medio penique —dijo Tom.

—Cójalo —dijo Bob, enfurruñado.

—No, no quiero cogerlo. Dámelo.

Bob se sacó la moneda del bolsillo y la tiró a lo lejos. Tom soltó a Bob y dejó que se levantara.

—Ahí se queda —declaró Tom—. Yo no lo quiero: no pensaba quedármelo. Pero tú querías hacer trampa y eso no me gusta. Ya no quiero ir más contigo —añadió, dando media vuelta para dirigirse a su casa, no sin recordar con tristeza la caza de ratas y otros placeres a los que junto con la compañía de Bob renunciaba.

—Pues déjelo si quiere —gritó Bob a su espalda—. Hago trampas si me da la gana: además, ese juego no es divertido. Y sé dónde hay un nido de jilgueros, pero ya me encargaré de que no lo sepa… Y es un imbécil, es un…

Tom avanzó sin mirar atrás y Yap siguió su ejemplo, después de que el baño de agua fría moderara sus pasiones.

—Anda, váyase con ese perro ahogado: no querría un perro así ni *regalao* —gritó Bob más fuerte, en un último esfuerzo por mantener el desafío—. Pero Tom no cedió a la provocación y no se dio la vuelta, y la voz de Bob vaciló un poco al añadir:

—Y no pienso enseñarle nada ni darle nada más, y no quiero saber nada de *usté*… Y aquí *tié* la navaja con mango de asta que me dio… —Bob lanzó la navaja en dirección a Tom tan lejos como pudo, pero sin otra consecuencia que el terrible vacío que sintió al perderla.

Permaneció inmóvil hasta después de que Tom pasara por el portón y desapareciera tras el seto. En el suelo, la navaja no sería de utilidad para nadie: Tom no se sentiría ofendido y tanto el orgullo como el rencor eran débiles pasiones para Bob en comparación con lo mucho que le gustaba aquel cuchillo. Los dedos se le estremecían y le rogaban que fuera a recoger

aquella navaja con cachas de asta que con tanta frecuencia asían por puro placer mientras la llevaba ociosa en el bolsillo. Además, tenía dos hojas y acababa de afilarlas. ¿Qué es la vida sin una navaja de bolsillo para aquel que ha conocido lo que supone poseer una? No: tirar el mango tras el hacha es un acto de desesperación comprensible, pero tirar una navaja de bolsillo tras un amigo implacable es una hipérbole en todos los sentidos, un exceso. De modo que Bob se dirigió arrastrando los pies hasta el lugar donde había caído al suelo su querida navaja y después de aquella separación temporal sintió un placer nuevo al asirla, abrir una hoja tras otra y palpar el filo con el calloso pulgar. ¡Pobre Bob! No era muy estricto en las cuestiones de honor, no era un personaje caballeresco. Este delicado aroma moral tampoco habría sido tenido en alta estima en Kennel Yard, el centro del mundo de Bob, suponiendo que allí se percibiera. Sin embargo, a pesar de todo, Bob no era un granuja ni un ladrón, tal como había decidido rápidamente nuestro amigo Tom.

Tom, como habrá advertido el lector, era un personaje radamantino y su sentido de la justicia era mayor que el de otros chicos: una justicia que desea infligir daño a los culpables en la medida en que lo merecen y que no se altera por las dudas en relación con la exacta medida del castigo. Cuando Tom llegó a casa, Maggie reparó en su aspecto sombrío, lo que frenó su alegría por verlo llegar antes de lo esperado y apenas se atrevió a dirigirle la palabra mientras él permanecía en silencio, lanzando guijarros a la presa del molino. No es nada agradable renunciar a una cacería de ratas cuando uno se ha hecho ilusiones. Pero si le hubieran preguntado a Tom en ese momento, habría dicho: «Volvería a hacer lo mism». Así era como acostumbraba a contemplar sus actos, en tanto que Maggie siempre desea haber hecho otra cosa.

Capítulo VII

Aparecen los tíos y las tías

Sin duda, los miembros de la familia Dodson eran agraciados y la señora Glegg no era la menos bella de las hermanas. Ningún observador imparcial que la contemplara sentada en el sillón de la señora Tulliver podría haber negado que a sus cincuenta años, poseía un lindo rostro y una hermosa figura, aunque para Tom y Maggie fuera el prototipo de la fealdad. Es cierto que despreciaba los beneficios de lucir ropas hermosas, porque, aunque señalaba con frecuencia que ninguna mujer poseía vestidos mejores que los suyos, no tenía por costumbre usar lo nuevo antes que lo viejo. Las demás podían, si así lo deseaban, ponerse sus mejores encajes a cada lavado, pero cuando ella muriera encontrarían guardados en el cajón derecho del armario del gabinete incluso más encajes de los que había tenido la señora Wooll de Saint Ogg's en toda su vida, aunque la señora Wooll los luciera antes de pagarlos. Otro tanto sucedía con los flequillos postizos: con toda certeza, la señora Glegg guardaba en los cajones los bucles castaños más brillantes y rizados, así como postizos con los más diversos grados de ondulación; sin embargo, mirar en un día laborable desde debajo de un flequillo brillante y rizado supondría introducir una confusión desagradable e irreal entre lo sagrado y lo profano. Cuando debía realizar una visita entre semana, la señora Glegg se ponía algunas veces uno de los flequillos que consideraba «de tercer», pero no lo hacía cuando se trataba de una visita a casa de una hermana, especialmente si ésta era la señora Tulliver, que desde su matrimonio había ofendido enormemente a

sus hermanas luciendo su propio cabello aunque, tal como había observado la señora Glegg a la señora Deane, una madre de familia, como Bessy, con un marido que estaba siempre pleiteando, debería saber lo que era adecuado. ¡Pero Bessy había sido siempre tan débil!

De manera que si el flequillo postizo de la señora Glegg aquel día estaba más rizado que de costumbre se debía a una intención concreta pretendía hacer alusión de modo mordaz e hiriente al peinado de la señora Tulliver, con dos coletas de rizos rubios separadas entre sí por una raya y el cabello debidamente alisado a ambos lados de ésta. La señora Tulliver había vertido lágrimas en varias ocasiones por los comentarios de su hermana Glegg sobre unos rizos tan poco adecuados para una madre de familia, pero los conservaba porque era consciente de que, con ellos, estaba más hermosa. Este día, la señora Glegg optó por conservar el sombrero en la casa —naturalmente, desatado y ligeramente echado hacia atrás—, cosa frecuente en ella cuando se encontraba de visita y no estaba de muy buen humor: una nunca sabía con qué corrientes de aire podía topar en casas desconocidas. Por el mismo motivo, llevaba una pequeña esclavina de marta que apenas le cubría los hombros y distaba de unirse sobre su bien formado busto, y protegía su largo cuello con una especie de caballo de Frisia de volantes diversos. Sería necesario ser un experto en modas pasadas para saber cuántas temporadas de retraso tenía el vestido de seda color pizarra de la señora Glegg, pero debido a ciertas constelaciones de puntitos amarillos y al olor a moho que evocaba algún húmedo arcón, era probable que perteneciera a un estrato de trajes lo bastante viejo para que le hubiera llegado ya el turno de ser usado.

La señora Glegg, sosteniendo en la mano su gran reloj de oro, cuya cadena le daba varias vueltas alrededor de los dedos, notificó a la señora Tulliver, que acababa de regresar de una visita a la cocina, que, al margen de lo que indicaran los relojes de los demás, en el suyo decía que eran más de las doce y media.

—No sé qué le pasa a nuestra hermana Pullet —prosiguió—. Antes, en esta familia todos éramos puntuales… Así era en época de mi pobre padre… y ninguna hermana tenía que esperar sentada media hora a que llegaran las demás. Pero si las costumbres de la familia se alteran, no será

por mi culpa: no seré yo quien llegue a una casa cuando los demás estén ya marchándose. *M'*asombra nuestra hermana Deane: antes se parecía a mí. Pero si quieres seguir mi consejo, Bessy, es mejor que adelantes la comida a que la atrases, y que tome nota la gente que tiene por costumbre llegar tarde.

—¡Ay, Dios mío! Seguro que llegan a tiempo, hermana —dijo la señora Tulliver con blanda irritación—. La comida no se servirá hasta la una y media, pero si la espera es demasiado larga para ti, permite que *t'*ofrezca un pastelito de queso y un vaso de vino.

—¡Pero Bessy! —exclamó la señora Glegg con una sonrisa amarga y un movimiento de cabeza apenas perceptible—. Habría dicho que conocías mejor a tu hermana: nunca he picado nada entre comidas y no pienso empezar ahora. Aunque me parece lamentable esta tontería de sacar la comida a la una y media cuando deberías hacerlo a la una. No es ésa la educación que has recibido, Bessy.

—Pero Jane, ¿qué puedo hacer? Al señor Tulliver no le gusta comer antes de las dos: ya he adelantado media hora el almuerzo por ti.

—Sí, sí, ya sé cómo son las cosas con los maridos: siempre quieren retrasarlo todo. Retrasarían la comida hasta después del té si su mujer fuera tan débil como para consentírselo. Lo siento por ti, Bessy, porque tienes poco carácter. Esperemos que los chicos no sufran por ello. Y espero que no nos hayas preparado una gran comida ni hayas hecho grandes gastos por tus hermanas, que se conforman con un mendrugo de pan seco antes que contribuir a que *t'*arruines con despilfarros. Me pregunto por qué no tomas como modelo a nuestra hermana Deane, que es mucho más sensata. Tú tienes dos niños que mantener, y tu marido ha gastado tu dinero en pleitos y es probable que gaste también el suyo. Habría sido más adecuado que prepararas un trozo de carne hervida, para aprovechar después el caldo en la cocina, y un pudín sencillo con sólo una cucharada de azúcar y sin especias —añadió la señora Glegg con enfático tono de protesta.

Con la hermana Glegg de aquel humor, el día se presentaba alegre. La señora Tulliver nunca llegaba a pelearse con ella, de la misma manera que el ave acuática que extiende una pata con gesto de desaprobación tampoco se pelea con el niño que le tira piedras. Sin embargo, esta cuestión del

almuerzo era delicada y en absoluto nueva, de modo que la señora Tulliver pudo darle la misma respuesta que en otras ocasiones anteriores.

—El señor Tulliver dice que, mientras pueda pagarla, siempre tendrá una buena comida para su familia —repuso—. Y tiene derecho a hacer lo que quiera en su casa, hermana.

—En fin, Bessy. Yo no puedo legar a tus hijos una cantidad suficiente de mis ahorros para librarlos de la ruina. Y no puedes contar con el dinero del señor Glegg: viene de una familia longeva y, aunque muriera antes que yo y me lo dejara todo, sabría hacer que fuera a parar a su familia.

La señora Tulliver se alegró de que el sonido de unas ruedas interrumpiera a la señora Glegg y se apresuró a salir a recibir a la hermana Pullet: tenía que ser ella porque sonaba como un carruaje de cuatro ruedas.

La señora Glegg meneó la cabeza e hizo una amarga mueca con los labios al pensar en las «cuatro rueda». Tenía una idea muy clara sobre el tema.

Cuando el coche se detuvo delante de la puerta de la señora Tulliver, la hermana Pullet estaba llorando y, al parecer, resultaba imprescindible que vertiera unas cuantas lágrimas más antes de bajar del vehículo, porque aunque su marido y la señora Tulliver estaban preparados para sujetarla, permaneció sentada, moviendo tristemente la cabeza mientras miraba a lo lejos entre lágrimas.

—¡Vaya! ¿Qué te pasa, hermana? —preguntó la señora Tulliver. No tenía mucha imaginación, pero se le ocurrió que tal vez el gran espejo del tocador del mejor dormitorio de la hermana Pullet se había roto otra vez.

No recibió otra respuesta que un gesto de negación con la cabeza mientras la señora Pullet se levantaba lentamente y bajaba de la calesa, no sin lanzar una mirada a su marido para ver si protegía de todo mal su hermoso vestido de seda. El señor Pullet era un hombre menudo de gran nariz, ojos pequeños y brillantes y labios finos; iba vestido con un traje negro de aspecto ligero con una corbata blanca que parecía fuertemente atada, de acuerdo con un principio más elevado que la mera comodidad personal. Al lado de su esposa alta y hermosa, ataviada con mangas de jamón, una larga capa y un gran sombrero emplumado y encintado, parecía

guardar la misma relación que una pequeña barca de pesca ante un bergantín con las velas desplegadas.

Una mujer afligida vestida a la última moda ofrece una imagen lamentable y un ejemplo llamativo de la complejidad que ha introducido en las emociones un alto grado de civilización. De la pena de un hotentote a la de una mujer con largas mangas de bucarán, con varias pulseras en cada brazo, un sombrero arquitectónico y delicadas cintas… ¡qué larga serie de gradaciones! En la ilustrada hija de la civilización, el abandono característico de la tristeza se ve frenado y variado de la más sutil manera hasta presentar un problema interesante a la mente analítica. Si con el corazón destrozado y los ojos casi cegados por la niebla de las lágrimas, tiene que cruzar una puerta con un escalón difícil y corre el riesgo de aplastarse las mangas de bucarán, la profunda conciencia de esta posibilidad produce una composición de fuerzas gracias a la cual toma un camino que le permite franquearla sin problemas. Si advierte que las lágrimas fluyen demasiado deprisa, desata las cintas y las lanza hacia atrás con gesto lánguido, movimiento conmovedor que indica, incluso en la más profunda pena, la esperanza de que lleguen momentos futuros menos húmedos en los que las cintas del sombrero recuperen su encanto. Si las lágrimas se demoran un poco, con la cabeza echada hacia atrás en un ángulo que no perjudique al sombrero, soporta el terrible momento en que la pena, causa de tanto cansancio, se ha convertido a su vez en un fastidio, contempla pensativamente los brazaletes y ajusta los cierres con un estudiado gesto de descuido que tan grato resultaría en momentos de calma.

La señora Pullet rozó delicadamente las jambas con los hombros (en aquella época, una mujer parecía ridícula a los ojos civilizados si no medía una yarda y media de hombro a hombro) y, tras hacerlo, ordenó a los músculos de su rostro que suministraran nuevas lágrimas mientras caminaba hacia el salón donde se encontraba sentada la señora Glegg.

—Hermana, llegas tarde: ¿qué ha pasado? —preguntó la señora Glegg con cierta brusquedad mientras se estrechaban la mano.

La señora Pullet se sentó, no sin levantar antes la capa cuidadosamente.

—Se ha ido —contestó, utilizando sin saberlo una figura retórica.

Así pues, en esta ocasión no se trataba del espejo, pensó la señora Tulliver.

—Murió anteayer —prosiguió la señora Pullet—. Y tenía las piernas tan gruesas como mi cuerpo —añadió con profunda tristeza, tras una pausa—. Le sacaron líquido muchas veces, y dicen que se podría nadar en el agua que salía.

—En ese caso, Sophy, es una suerte que se haya ido, sea quien sea —repuso la señora Glegg con la rapidez y el énfasis propios de una mente despejada y decidida—. Aunque debo decir que no tengo ni remota idea de quién estás hablando.

—Pero yo sí lo sé —dijo la señora Pullet, suspirando y moviendo la cabeza—. Y no se ha visto un caso similar de *hidropisía* en toda la parroquia. Lo sé porque se trata de la vieja señora Sutton, la de Twentylands.

—Bueno, pero es nada tuyo, ni gran conocida, que yo sepa —objetó la señora Glegg, que siempre lloraba lo adecuado cuando algo acontecía a un miembro de su familia, pero nunca en otras ocasiones.

—Claro que la conocía, si le he visto las piernas cuando parecían vejigas… Y era una señora capaz de multiplicar una y otra vez su capital y de gestionarlo ella misma hasta el último momento. Y guardaba siempre las llaves bajo *l'*almohada. Imagino que no hay muchos viejos parroquianos como ella.

—Según dicen, se podría llenar un carro con las medicinas que tomó —comentó el señor Pullet.

—¡Ah! —suspiró la señora Pullet—. Años antes de padecer esta *hidropi*sía se quejó a los médicos, pero no supieron averiguar qué tenía. Y me dijo, cuando fui a verla en las últimas Navidades: «Señora Pullet, si alguna vez tiene *hidropisía*, piense en m». Eso fue lo que dijo —añadió la señora Pullet, echándose a llorar amargamente otra vez—: Ésas fueron sus palabras exactas. Y la entierran el sábado, y Pullet está invitado al funeral.

—Sophy —dijo la señora Glegg, incapaz de contener su tendencia a la reconvención racional—. Sophy, me sorprende que *t'*inquietes y perjudiques tu salud por personas que no son de la familia. Tu pobre padre nunca lo hizo, ni tampoco la tía Frances, ni nadie de la familia, que yo sepa.

No te preocuparías más si se nos comunicara que nuestro primo Abbott había muerto de repente sin *testamiento*.

La señora Pullet, tras dar por finalizadas sus lágrimas, permaneció en silencio, más halagada que molesta por la regañina por llorar demasiado. No todo el mundo podía permitirse llorar tanto por una vecina que no le había dejado nada; pero la señora Pullet se había casado con un caballero rural y tenía tiempo y dinero suficientes para llevar el llanto y lo que fuera necesario hasta el punto culminante de la respetabilidad.

—Aunque la señora Sutton no murió sin *testamiento* —intervino el señor Pullet, con la confusa sensación de respaldar así las lágrimas de su esposa—. La nuestra es una parroquia rica, pero dicen que nadie deja tanto como la señora Sutton. Y sólo tiene un heredero, se lo ha dejado todo a un sobrino de su marido.

—De qué le habrá servido ser tan rica, entonces —dijo la señora Glegg — si no tenía más que un familiar de su marido para dejárselo todo. Es triste no tener a nadie más para legar el fruto de las economías: aunque yo no soy *d'*esos que desearían morir sin dejar más dinero invertido que el que los demás han calculado; pero es una pena que tenga que salir de la familia propia.

—Hermana —dijo la señora Pullet, que se había recuperado lo suficiente para quitarse el velo y doblarlo cuidadosamente—, estoy segura de que la señora Sutton ha legado su dinero a un hombre correcto, porque tiene problemas de asma y se acuesta todas las noches a las ocho. Él mismo me lo contó con toda confianza un domingo cuando vino a nuestra iglesia. Lleva una piel de liebre sobre el pecho y le tiembla la voz al hablar… Es todo un caballero. Le conté que no hay muchos meses al año que no tenga que pasar por las manos del médico, y me dijo: «¡Cuánto lo siento, señora Pullet!». Ésas fueron sus palabras exactas, ni más ni menos. ¡Ah! —suspiró la señora Pullet, meneando la cabeza ante la idea de que pocas personas podían comprender sus experiencias con los preparados de color rosa y blanco, los productos fuertes de frascos los pequeños, los más suaves de los frascos grandes, los bolos húmedos a un chelín y las pócimas a dieciocho peniques. Y añadió, volviéndose a su marido—: Hermana, desearía ir a quitarme la capota, ¿has visto dónde está la sombrerera?

El señor Pullet, en un incomprensible descuido, la había olvidado. Salió a buscarla, compungido, para remediar la omisión.

—Que la suban al piso de arriba, hermana —dijo la señora Tulliver, deseando salir de inmediato, no fuera la señora Glegg a empezar a explicar lo que le parecía que Sophy fuera la primera Dodson en arruinarse la salud con potingues.

La señora Tulliver se alegró de subir al piso con su hermana Pullet y de poder contemplar atentamente la capota antes de probársela y charlar un rato sobre sombreros. Ésta era una de las vertientes de la debilidad de Bessy que suscitaba la compasión fraternal de la señora Glegg: Bessy, teniendo en cuenta su situación, se arreglaba en exceso; además, era demasiado orgullosa para vestir a su hija con las buenas ropas que su hermana Glegg le daba, extraídas de los estratos más profundos de su arcón: era un pecado y una pena comprar nada para vestir a aquella niña, como no fuera un par de zapatos. Sin embargo, en este aspecto la Señora Glegg no era del todo justa con su hermana Bessy, porque la señora Tulliver, en su momento, hizo grandes esfuerzos para convencer a Maggie de que se pusiera el sombrerito de paja y el vestido de seda teñida hecho a partir de uno de la tía Glegg, pero con un resultado tal que la señora Tulliver se vio obligada a abrazarlos estrechamente contra su pecho; Maggie, tras declarar que el vestido olía a un tinte asqueroso, aprovechó para echarse por encima la salsa del asado en el primer domingo que tuvo que ponérselo y, al dar con esta solución, la empleó también tironeando de las cintas verdes de la capota hasta dejarla como un queso con guarnición de lechuga mustia. Debe decirse en descargo de Maggie que Tom se había reído al verla con aquel sombrerito y le había dicho que parecía un mamarracho. También la tía Pullet le regalaba ropa, pero ésta era siempre nueva y lo bastante bonita para gustar tanto a Maggie como a su madre. De entre todas sus hermanas, la señora Tulliver prefería, sin duda, a su hermana Pullet, y esta preferencia era recíproca, aunque la señora Pullet se lamentaba de que los hijos de Bessy fueran tan traviesos y toscos: estaba dispuesta a hacer por ellos todo lo posible, pero era una pena que no fueran tan buenos ni tan guapos como la hija de Deane. Por su parte, Maggie y Tom consideraban que la tía Pullet, en comparación con la tía Glegg, era tolerable. Tom siempre se negaba a ir a verlas más de una vez

durante las vacaciones; naturalmente, en esa única ocasión los tíos le daban un pequeño premio, pero cerca de la bodega de la casa de la tía Pullet había muchos sapos a los que tirar piedras, de modo que prefería visitarla a ella. Maggie se estremecía al verlos y le provocaban horribles pesadillas, pero le gustaba la caja de rapé con música del tío Pullet. No obstante, cuando la señora Tulliver no se encontraba presente, sus hermanas coincidían en afirmar que la sangre de los Tulliver no combinaba bien con la de los Dodson; que, en realidad, los pobres hijos de Bessy eran Tulliver y que Tom, a pesar de que poseía la tez de los Dodson, con toda probabilidad sería tan «contrarios» como su padre. En cuanto a Maggie, era el vivo retrato de la tía Moss, la hermana del señor Tulliver, una mujer de grandes huesos que se había casado con el hombre más pobre del mundo, no tenía vajilla de porcelana y su marido pasaba grandes apuros para pagar el arrendamiento. Sin embargo, cuando la señora Pullet se encontró a solas con la señora Tulliver en el piso superior, los comentarios derivaron de modo natural contra la señora Glegg y coincidieron confidencialmente en que no había manera de saber qué espantajo traería la próxima vez. La aparición de la señora Deane con la pequeña Lucy abrevió su téte-á-téte y la señora Tulliver tuvo que contemplar con una punzada de dolor el peinado de los rizos rubios de la niña. Era incomprensible que la señora Deane, la más delgada y cetrina de todas las señoritas Dodson, hubiera tenido una niña que cualquiera habría tomado por hija de la señora Tulliver. Y Maggie siempre parecía el doble de morena cuando estaba junto a Lucy.

Así sucedió aquel día cuando Maggie regresó del jardín junto con Tom, su padre y el tío Glegg. Maggie, que se había quitado la capota con poco cuidado, entró con el cabello tan liso como despeinado y corrió hacia Lucy, que se encontraba junto a su madre. Sin duda, el contraste entre ambas primas era notorio y, para una mirada superficial, Maggie salía perdiendo de la comparación, aunque un observador atento habría advertido aspectos en ella que encerraban mayores promesas en la madurez que la pulcra perfección de Lucy: ofrecían un contraste similar al existente entre un perrito oscuro, tosco y grande y un gatito blanco. Lucy ofrecía su boca como una rosa para que le dieran un beso. Todo en ella era bonito: el cuellecito redondo con una sarta de cuentas de coral, la naricita recta, en

absoluto respingona, las cejitas claras, más oscuras que los rizos, que hacían juego con los ojos color de avellana que contemplaban con tímido placer a Maggie, la cual le llevaba una cabeza aunque apenas tenía un año más. Maggie siempre miraba a Lucy con placer. Le gustaba idear un mundo donde los niños no crecieran nunca e imaginaba que la reina sería como Lucy, llevaría una corona en la cabeza y un pequeño cetro en la mano… aunque en realidad sería Maggie con la apariencia de Lucy.

—¡Lucy! —exclamó, después de besarla—. ¿Quieres quedarte a dormir con Tom y conmigo? Tom, dale un beso.

Tom se había acercado también a Lucy, pero no tenía la menor intención de besarla. Se había aproximado con Maggie porque le parecía más fácil que ir a decir «¿Cómo está usted?» a todas esas tías y tíos. Permanecía de pie sin mirar a ningún punto concreto en particular, sonrojado y torpe, con la media sonrisa habitual en los chicos tímidos cuando están acompañados, como si se encontraran allí por error y en cierto grado de bochornosa desnudez.

—¡Cómo! —exclamó la tía Glegg con énfasis—. ¿Desde cuándo los niños y las niñas entran en una sala donde están sus tíos y tías y no saludan? No era así cuando yo era pequeña.

—*Ir* a saludar a vuestros tíos y tías, queridos niños —ordenó la señora Tulliver con aire inquieto y triste, deseando susurrarle a Maggie que fuera a peinarse.

—Bien, ¿cómo estáis? ¿Os portáis bien? —preguntó la tía Glegg con el mismo tono enfático mientras los cogía por las manos, haciéndoles daño con los grandes anillos, y los besaba en las mejillas contra su voluntad—. Alza los ojos, Tom, alza los ojos. Los chicos que están internos en un colegio deben llevar la cabeza alta. Mírame. —Al parecer, Tom declinó ese placer e intentó liberar la mano—. Ponte el pelo detrás de las orejas, Maggie, y colócate bien el vestido en los hombros.

La tía Glegg siempre les hablaba con voz alta y enfática, como si los tomara por sordos o idiotas: creía que era una manera de hacerles sentir que eran criaturas subordinadas y de poner freno a las tendencias traviesas. Los niños de Bessy estaban tan mimados que necesitaban que alguien les recordara su deber.

—Queridos niños: crecéis muy deprisa. Temo que os quedéis un poco débiles —dijo la tía Pullet con tono compasivo, mirando a su madre por encima de sus cabezas con expresión melancólica—. Me parece que esta niña tiene demasiado pelo: en tu lugar, yo se lo vaciaría un poco y se lo cortaría, hermana. No es bueno para su salud. No me sorprendería que por este motivo tuviera la piel tan oscura, ¿no crees, hermana Deane?

—No sabría qué decirte, hermana —contestó la señora Deane, apretando los labios y mirando a Maggie con aire crítico.

—No, no, —contestó el señor Tulliver—. Esta niña está perfectamente sana y no tiene ninguna enfermedad. Bien existen el trigo candeal y el trigo moreno, y a algunos les gusta más el oscuro. Aunque me parecería bien que Bessy se lo cortara y se lo dejara liso.

Una terrible decisión empezó a tomar forma en el pecho de Maggie, pero la detuvo el deseo de saber si la tía Deane iba a dejar que Lucy se quedara: pocas veces permitía que estuviera con ellos. Tras dar varios motivos para rechazar la invitación, la señora Deane preguntó a la interesada.

—¿Verdad que no quieres quedarte aquí sin tu madre, Lucy?

—Sí, madre, por favor —contestó Lucy tímidamente, sonrojándose hasta el cuello.

—Buena respuesta, Lucy. Deja que se quede, señora Deane, deja que se quede —dijo el señor Deane, un hombre grande pero de aire despierto, con un aspecto físico que se puede encontrar en todas las clases sociales inglesas: calva en la coronilla, patillas rojas, frente despejada. Y aspecto sólido, aunque no pesado. Se pueden ver nobles como el señor Deane y tenderos o jornaleros, pero la agudeza de sus ojos castaños era menos común que su figura. Sostenía con fuerza una caja de rapé de plata y de vez en cuando ofrecía una pulgarada al señor Tulliver, cuya tabaquera sólo tenía de plata dos adornos, de modo que acostumbraban a bromear sobre el hecho de que el señor Tulliver también quisiera intercambiar das cajas. La caja del señor Deane se la habían regalado dos socios principales de la empresa a la que pertenecía, junto con una participación en el negocio como reconocimiento por su valiosa colaboración como administrador. No había hombre más respetado en Saint Ogg’s que el señor Deane, y algunas

personas llegaban a opinar que la señorita Susan Dodson, de la que se decía que había hecho la peor boda de todas las hermanas, algún día viajaría en mejor coche y viviría en mejor casa incluso que su hermana Pullet. Nadie sabía hasta dónde podía llegar un hombre que había empezado a subir en una gran empresa harinera y naviera como la de Guest & Co., vinculada a la banca. Y la señora Deane, tal como comentaban sus íntimas amigas, estaba orgullosa y satisfecha: ella, en particular, no permitiría que su esposo se quedara quieto por falta de acicates.

—Maggie —dijo la señora Tulliver, en cuanto se resolvió la cuestión de la invitación a Lucy, haciendo una seña a Maggie para que se de acercara—: ¿no te da vergüenza? Ve a peinarte. Te dije que no entraras sin haber ido a ver a Martha primero, ya lo sabes.

—Tom, ven conmigo —susurró Maggie, tirándole de da manga al pasar junto a él, y Tom da siguió encantado.

—Sube conmigo, Tom —cuchicheó cuando estuvieron fuera—. Quiero hacer una cosa antes de comer.

—No hay tiempo para jugar a nada antes de comer —objetó Tom, que no deseaba distraerse con ninguna otra idea.

—Sí, para esto sí hay tiempo: haz el favor de venir, Tom.

Tom siguió a Maggie escaleras arriba hasta el dormitorio de su madre y la vio dirigirse al cajón del que sacó unas grandes tijeras.

—¿Para qué, Maggie? —preguntó Tom, cuya curiosidad se había despertado.

Maggie contestó agarrándose dos mechones de la frente y cortándolos en línea recta a media altura.

—¡Atiza, Maggie! ¡Te la vas a cargar! —exclamó Tom—. Será mejor que no cortes más.

Mientras Tom hablaba, las grandes tijeras volvieron a cerrarse con un chasquido y el chico no pudo dejar de pensar que aquello era bastante divertido: Maggie estaría muy rara.

—Toma, ahora me cortas tú por detrás, Tom —dijo Maggie, entusiasmada ante su atrevimiento y deseosa de terminar la hazaña.

—Te la vas a cargar, ¿sabes? —dijo Tom, moviendo la cabeza con gesto admonitorio y vacilando un poco antes de coger las tijeras.

—Me da igual ¡Date prisa! —ordenó Maggie, dando una pequeña patada en el suelo. Tenía las mejillas encendidas.

Los mechones negros eran tan gruesos… nada podía resultar más tentador para un muchacho que había probado ya el placer prohibido de cortar las crines de un poni. Quienes conocen la satisfacción de hacer que las dos hojas de las tijeras se encuentren tras vencer da resistencia de una mata de pelo ya saben a qué me refiero. Un delicioso tijeretazo, otro y otro más, y dos mechones de la nuca cayeron pesadamente sobre el suelo; Maggie tenía la cabeza llena de escaleras y trasquilones, pero se sentía libre y ligera, como si hubiera salido de un bosque a un claro.

—¡Oh, Maggie! —exclamó Tom, saltando a su alrededor y dándose palmadas en las rodillas mientras reía—. ¡Atiza, qué pinta tan rara! Mírate al espejo: te pareces al idiota al que tiramos cáscaras de nueces en el colegio.

Maggie sintió una punzada inesperada. Tenía intención, sobre todo, de librarse de aquel cabello molesto y de los modestos comentarios, y también había pensado que aquella acción tan decidida supondría un triunfo sobre su madre y sus tías; no pretendía que le quedara el pelo bonito —eso estaba totalmente fuera de su pensamiento—: sólo deseaba que la consideraran una niña lista y no le buscaran defectos. Pero cuando Tom se rió de ella y dijo que se parecía a un tonto de pueblo contempló la situación desde otro ángulo. Maggie se miró en el espejo mientras Tom seguía riéndose y dando palmadas, y sus mejillas sonrojadas empezaron a palidecer y los labios le temblaron un poco.

—¡Maggie! Tendrás que bajar a comer así —dijo Tom—. ¡Caramba!

—No te rías de mí, Tom —dijo Maggie con tono apasionado, echándose a llorar de furia. Dio una patada al suelo y le propinó un empujón.

—¡Y ahora *t'*enfadas! —exclamó Tom—. Entonces, ¿por qué te lo has cortado? Voy a bajar: huelo la comida.

Corrió escaleras abajo y dejó a la pobre Maggie entregada a la amarga sensación de irrevocabilidad que experimentaba casi a diario. Ahora que lo había hecho, se daba cuenta de que era una tontería: iba a oír comentarios sobre su cabello y éste estaría más presente que nunca; Maggie se precipitaba a actuar con impulsos apasionados y después su imaginación le

pintaba con todo detalle, no sólo las consecuencias de sus actos, sino lo que habría sucedido si no hubiera hecho nada. Tom nunca cometía tonterías como esa, ya que poseía una capacidad instintiva y maravillosa para discernir lo que se volvería en su favor o en su contra, y así sucedía que aunque era mucho más terco e inflexible que Maggie, su madre pocas veces lo reprendía por travieso. Si en alguna ocasión Tom cometía un error similar, se mantenía firme en él a toda costa: le «daba igua». Si rompía el látigo de la calesa de su padre por azotar la puerta de la cancela, no había podido evitarlo: el látigo no debería haberse quedado atrapado en el gozne. Si Tom Tulliver azotaba la puerta estaba convencido no sólo de que era justificable que chicos azotaran las puertas, sino de que era justificable que Tom Tulliver azotara aquella en concreto, por lo que no tenía intención de arrepentirse. En cambio, mientras lloraba delante del espejo, a Maggie le parecía imposible bajar a comer y soportar las miradas y las palabras severas de las tías mientras Tom, Lucy y Kezia, que la esperaban en la mesa, y quizá su padre y sus tíos, se reían de ella: si Tom se había reído sin duda todos los demás también lo harían: y si no se hubiera tocado el pelo, podría haberse sentado con Tom y Lucy, y habría comido el pudín de albaricoque con crema. ¿Qué otra cosa podía hacer que llorar? Permaneció sentada tan indefensa y desesperada entre los negros mechones como Áyax entre las ovejas muertas. Tal vez su angustia parezca muy trivial a los curtidos mortales que tienen que pensar en facturas navideñas, amores muertos y amistades rotas, pero no era menos amarga para Maggie —tal vez incluso más— de lo que lo son lo que nos gusta denominar antitéticamente «las verdaderas pena» de la madurez. «Ay, hijo, ya tendrás problemas de verdad para preocuparte dentro de poc», nos han dicho a casi todos en la infancia para consolarnos, y lo hemos repetido a otros en cuanto hemos crecido. Todos hemos sollozado lastimeramente, sostenidos por diminutas piernas desnudas que asomaban por encima de pequeños calcetines, al perder de vista a nuestra madre o a la niñera en algún lugar desconocido, pero ya no podemos evocar el dolor del momento y llorarlo de nuevo, tal como podemos hacer con los sufrimientos de cinco o diez años atrás. Todos estos instantes tan intensos han dejado su huella y perduran en nosotros, pero estas huellas se han mezclado irremisiblemente con la textura

más sólida de la juventud y la madurez; por ello podemos contemplar los disgustos de nuestros niños con una sonrisa de incredulidad ante su dolor. ¿Hay alguien que pueda recuperar la experiencia de su infancia, no sólo con el recuerdo de lo que hizo y lo que le sucedió, de lo que le gustaba y lo que le disgustaba cuando llevaba bata y pantalones, sino plenamente, con la conciencia revivida de lo que sentía entonces, cuando el tiempo entre dos veranos transcurría tan lentamente? ¿Lo que sentía cuando los compañeros de colegio lo echaban de su juego porque lanzaba mal el balón por mera terquedad? ¿O en un día de vacaciones lluvioso, cuando no sabía cómo divertirse y pasaba de la ociosidad a la travesura, de ésta al desafío y de éste al malhumor? ¿O cuando su madre se negaba tajantemente a permitir que tuviera una levita aquel trimestre, aunque todos los niños de su edad llevaban ya la chaqueta con faldones? Si pudiéramos recordar estas amarguras tan tempranas y nuestras oscuras previsiones, aquella concepción de la vida sin perspectivas que tan intensa hacía la amargura, no nos reiríamos de las penas dee nuestros hijos.

—Señorita Maggie, tiene que bajar ahora mismo —anunció Kezia, entrando en la habitación a toda prisa—. ¡Cielo santo! ¿Qué ha hecho? Nunca había visto adefesio semejante.

—No quiero bajar, Kezia —exclamó Maggie enfadada—. ¡Vete!

—Señorita, tiene que bajar ahora mismo: su madre lo ha dicho —dijo Kezia, acercándose a Maggie y tomándola de la mano para levantarla del suelo.

—Vete, Kezia. No quiero comer —insistió Maggie, resistiéndose a Kezia—. No iré.

—En fin, no puedo quedarme: tengo que servir la comida —dijo Kezia, saliendo otra vez.

—Maggie, tonta —dijo Tom asomando la cabeza a la habitación diez minutos más tarde—. ¿Por qué no bajas a comer? Hay muchas cosas buenas y dice nuestra madre que bajes. ¿Por qué lloras, boba?

¡Era terrible! Tom se comportaba con dureza e indiferencia: si hubiera sido él el que lloraba en el suelo, Maggie habría llorado con él. Y, además, estaba aquella comida tan buena: y tenía tanta hambre. Aquello era muy triste.

Sin embargo, Tom no era totalmente indiferente. No era propenso a las lágrimas y no le apetecía que la pena de Maggie le estropeara la perspectiva de disfrutar de los dulces, de modo que se acercó a Maggie, puso su cabeza junto a la suya y le dijo en un tono bajo y consolador:

—¿No quieres venir, Maggie? ¿Te traigo un poco de pudín cuando ya me haya comido el mío? ¿Un poco de crema y otras cosas?

—Sssí —contestó Maggie, empezando a sentirse un poco mejor.

—Muy bien —dijo Tom, alejándose. Pero regresó de nuevo a la puerta y añadió—: Será mejor que vengas, ¿sabes? Tenemos postre con nueces y vino de prímula.

Las lágrimas de Maggie habían cesado y cuando Tom se marchó parecía reflexionar. El buen carácter de Tom había quitado filo al sufrimiento y las nueces con vino de prímula empezaban a ejercer legítima influencia.

Se levantó lentamente sobre los mechones dispersos y bajó las escaleras despacio. Se detuvo detrás de la puerta entreabierta del comedor con el hombro apoyado en la jamba, y atisbó por ella. Vio a Tom y a Lucy, separados por una silla vacía, y la crema en una mesilla lateral: aquello era demasiado. Entró furtivamente y se dirigió hacia la silla vacía. Pero apenas se había sentado cuando se arrepintió y deseó encontrarse de nuevo en el piso de arriba.

La señora Tulliver soltó un gritito al verla y se llevó tal susto que dejó caer la gran cuchara de salsa de carne en la fuente, con graves resultados para el mantel. Kezia no había revelado el motivo de la negativa de Maggie a bajar, ya que no deseaba sobresaltar a la señora en el momento de trinchar la carne, y la señora Tulliver pensó que no sería nada más que un ataque de terquedad que llevaba en sí mismo su castigo al privar a Maggie de la mitad de la comida.

El grito de la señora Tulliver hizo que todos los ojos se volvieran hacia donde ella miraba; las mejillas y las orejas de Maggie empezaron a arder mientras el tío Glegg, un anciano caballero de aire afable y cabello blanco exclamaba:

—¡Vaya! ¿Quién es esta muchacha, si no la conozco? ¿Es una niña que has recogido en la calle, Kezia?

—Caramba, si *s'*ha cortado el pelo —comentó el señor Tulliver en voz baja al señor Deane, riendo divertido—. ¿Habías visto alguna vez una niña como ésta?

—¡Vaya con la señorita! Qué graciosa *t'*has puesto —dijo el tío Pullet, y tal vez fuera el comentario más lacerante que hizo en su vida.

—¡No te da vergüenza! —exclamó la tía Glegg con el tono de voz más severo y sonoro que pudo emplear—. Deberían azotar a las niñas que se cortan el pelo y alimentarlas con pan y agua, en lugar de permitir que se sienten con sus tíos y tías.

—¡Vaya, vaya! —añadió el tío Glegg, intentando suavizar con una broma esta denuncia—. Creo que hay que enviarla al calabozo y cortarle el resto del pelo, al menos para igualárselo.

—Ahora parece más que nunca una gitana —señaló la tía Pullet, en tono de conmiseración—. Qué mala suerte, hermana, que esta niña sea tan morena: y eso que el niño es rubito. No creo que ser tan morena le facilite las cosas en la vida.

—Es una niña mala, capaz de destrozar el corazón de su madre —gimió la señora Tulliver con lágrimas en los ojos.

Maggie tenía la sensación de estar escuchando un coro de burlas y reproches. Se sonrojó de rabia y, por unos momentos, se sintió capaz de adoptar una actitud rebelde; Tom pensó que estaba lista para defenderse reconfortada por la llegada del pudín con crema. Convencido de ello, le susurró:

—¡Atiza! Maggie, ya *t'*he dicho que te las cargarías —murmuró con intención amable, pero Maggie dio por hecho que Tom se recreaba con su ignominia. La capacidad de desafío la abandonó y, con el corazón henchido de pena, se puso en pie, corrió hacia su padre, escondió el rostro en su hombro y estalló en sollozos.

Vamos, vamos, mocita —la consoló su padre con cariño, rodeándola con el brazo—. No importa: tenías derecho a cortártelo si te molestaba. Deja de llorar: tu padre está de tu parte.

¡Qué dulces y tiernas palabras! Maggie nunca olvidó los momentos en que su padre estuvo a su lado: los guardó en el corazón y pensaba en ellos

años más tarde, cuando todos decían que su padre los había tratado muy mal.

—¡Cómo malcría tu marido a esta niña, Bessy! —exclamó la señora Glegg en un sonoro «apart» con la señora Tulliver—. Como te descuides, la va a estropear. Nuestro padre nunca educó así a sus hijas: en ese caso, habríamos sido una familia muy distinta de la que somos.

En aquel momento, las penas domésticas de la señora Tulliver parecían haber alcanzado el punto en que se llega a la insensibilidad. No advirtió la observación de su hermana y se limitó a echar hacia atrás las cintas de la cofia y servir el pudín con muda resignación.

Con el postre llegó la liberación completa de Maggie, porque dijeron a los niños que podían tomar las nueces y el vino de prímula en el cenador, puesto que el día era templado, y corretearon por los arbustos del jardín, cubiertos de brotes, con la presteza de animalillos escapados de una lente ustoria.

La señora Tulliver tenía motivos especiales para darles permiso: ahora que se había terminado la comida y estaba todo el mundo más relajado, era el momento adecuado para comunicar la intención del señor Tulliver en relación con Tom, y le parecía preferible que éste se encontrara ausente. Los niños estaban acostumbrados a oír hablar de ellos con tanta libertad como si fueran pájaros y no pudiera entende nada, por mucho que estiraran el cuello y escucharan; sin embargo en esta ocasión, la señora Tulliver mostraba una discreción inusual porque se había dado cuenta de que a Tom no le gustaba la idea de entrar de pupilo de un clérigo, cosa que le parecía equiparable a ir a estudiar con un agente de la policía. La señora Tulliver tenía la triste sensación de que su marido haría lo que se le antojara, sin importarle lo que dijeran sus hermanas Glegg o Pullet, pero por lo menos, si todo salía mal, no podrían decir que Bessy se había visto arrastrada por el capricho de su marido sin decir una palabra a sus parientes.

—Tulliver —dijo, interrumpiendo la conversación de su marido con el señor Deane—: ha llegado el momento de contar a las tías y tíos de los niños lo que piensas hacer con Tom, ¿no te parece?

—*D'*acuerdo —contestó el señor Tulliver secamente—: no me importa contarles a todos lo que pienso hacer con él. He decidido —añadió, mirando

hacia el señor Glegg y el señor Deane— que lo enviaré con el señor Stelling, un clérigo que vive en King's Lorton, un individuo muy brillante, para que lo prepare en diversas materias.

Se oyó un murmullo de sorpresa entre los presentes, similar al que se observa en una congregación rural cuando desde el púlpito se alude a sus asuntos cotidianos: en la misma medida resultaba asombroso que apareciera un clérigo en los asuntos familiares del señor Tulliver. En cuanto al tío Pullet, no se habría desconcertado más si el señor Tulliver hubiera dicho que iba a enviar a Tom con el presidente de la Cámara de los Lores, ya que el tío Pullet pertenecía a esa clase extinta de propietarios rurales británicos que vestían con buen paño, pagaban impuestos y contribuciones municipales elevadas, acudían a la iglesia y comían bien los domingos, sin pararse a pensar en el origen de la constitución de la Iglesia y el Estado británicos, de la misma manera que no meditaba sobre el sistema solar o las estrellas. Es triste, pero cierto, el hecho de que el señor Pullet tuviera la confusa idea de que un obispo era una especie de *baronet* que podía o no ser clérigo; y puesto que el rector de su parroquia era un hombre de familia y fortuna notables, la idea de que un clérigo pudiera ser maestro resultaba demasiado alejada de su experiencia para resultar concebible. Ya sé que resulta difícil en estos tiempos instruidos concebir la ignorancia del tío Pullet, pero basta con pensar en los notables resultados que obtienen las facultades naturales en condiciones favorables. Y el tío Pullet poseía una gran capacidad natural para la ignorancia. Fue él el primero en expresar su asombro.

—¡Vaya! ¿Y por qué va a enviarlo con un clérigo? —exclamó con expresión de asombro en los ojos, mirando al señor Glegg y al señor Deane para ver si éstos daban muestras de comprensión.

—¡Caramba! Porque, por lo que sé, los clérigos son los mejores maestros —contestó el pobre Tulliver que, en el laberinto de este mundo tan enredoso, se asía con rapidez y tenacidad a lo que parecía seguro—. Jacobs, el de la *'cademia*, no es clérigo y lo ha hecho muy mal. Así que pensé que si lo ponía a estudiar otra vez, debería ser con otra persona. Y, por lo que he podido averiguar, el señor Stelling es del tipo de hombre que quiero. Y tengo intención de que mi chico vaya con él desde el principio del trimestre

de verano —concluyó con tono decidido, dando un golpecito a la tabaquera y tomando un pellizco de rapé.

—Entonces tendrá usted que pagar una hermosa factura cada medio año, ¿verdad, Tulliver? En general, los clérigos saben bastante —dijo el señor Deane, aspirando una pulgarada vigorosamente, como siempre hacía cuando deseaba mantener una postura neutral.

—¡Cómo! ¿Y cree que el clérigo éste le enseñará a distinguir un buen puñado de trigo cuando lo vea, vecino Tulliver? —preguntó el señor Glegg, divertido con su broma. Dado que se había retirado de los negocios, consideraba que no sólo le estaba permitido tomarse todo a la ligera, sino que era incluso adecuado que lo hiciera.

—Bueno, saben, tengo planes para Tom —afirmó el señor Tulliver; después hizo una pausa y alzó la copa.

—Bien, si se me permite hablar, cosa que sucede raras veces —intervino la señora Glegg con tono amargo—, diré que me gustaría saber qué cosa buena le traerá al chico el ser educado por encima de su fortuna.

—¡A ver! —exclamó el señor Tulliver sin mirar a la señora Glegg y dirigiéndose a la sección masculina de su público—: Miren, he decidido que Tom no se dedique a lo mío. Lo he pensado bien y he tomado la decisión a partir de lo que vi que hizo Garnett con su hijo. Quiero que se dedique a algún negocio en el que pueda entrar sin capital, y quiero darle una educación que le permita tratar en pie de igualdad a los abogados y tipos así y echarme una mano de vez en cuando.

La señora Glegg emitió un prolongado sonido gutural con los labios apretados en una sonrisa mezcla de lástima y burla.

—Algunas personas harían mejor en dejar tranquilos a los abogados —espetó.

—Entonces, ¿este clérigo dirige un colegio de enseñanza secundaria, como el de Market Bewley? —preguntó el señor Deane.

—No, nada de eso —contestó el señor Tulliver—. Sólo piensa aceptar dos o tres alumnos, así podrá dedicarles más tiempo.

—Ah, así terminará antes su educación: no pueden aprender mucho cuando son tantos en clase —comentó el tío Pullet, pensando que ya estaba empezando a entender este asunto tan complicado.

—Entonces, querrá que le pague más, supongo —dijo el señor Glegg.

—Claro, claro: ni más ni menos que cien al año, sólo eso —dijo el señor Tulliver, orgulloso de su decisión—. Pero eso es como una inversión: la educación será para Tom como un capital.

—Sí, eso es cierto —dijo el señor Glegg—. Bien, bien, vecino Tulliver: quizá tenga usted razón, quizá tenga razón:

Cuando no quedan tierras ni dinero,
la educación es lo primero.

—Recuerdo que leí este versito en un escaparate de Buxton. Y nosotros, que no tenemos estudios, será mejor que guardemos el dinero, ¿verdad, vecino Pullet? —El señor Glegg se frotó las rodillas con aire complacido.

—Glegg, me sorprendes —dijo su esposa—. Esto es impropio de un hombre de tu edad y situación.

—¿Qué es impropio, señora Glegg? —preguntó el señor Glegg con un guiño a los presentes—. ¿La chaqueta nueva que llevo de color azul?

—Cuánto lamento tu debilidad, Glegg. Como digo, es impropio que bromees cuando ves que un miembro de tu familia se dirige de cabeza a la ruina.

—Si se refiere usted a mí —dijo el señor Tulliver, francamente irritado —, no es necesario que se inquiete. Puedo dirigir mis asuntos sin molestar a nadie.

—¡Ah! —dijo el señor Deane, introduciendo prudentemente una nueva idea—. Ahora recuerdo que alguien dijo que Wakem iba a enviar a su hijo, el chico deforme, con un clérigo, ¿verdad, Susan? —añadió, dirigiéndose a su esposa.

—No sé nada de eso —contestó la señora Deane, cerrando de nuevo los labios con fuerza. La señora Deane no era partidaria de intervenir en una conversación en la que se lanzaran tantos proyectiles.

—Bien —prosiguió el señor Tulliver, hablando animadamente para que la señora Glegg advirtiera que no le importaba su opinión—: si Wakem piensa en enviar a su hijo con un clérigo, pueden estar seguros de que yo no me equivoco al mandar a Tom con otro. Wakem es el mayor bribón que

haya creado Pero Botero, pero sabe calar a un hombre enseguida. Sí, sí, díganme quién es el carnicero de Wakem y les diré dónde deben comprar la carne.

—Pero el hijo del abogado Wakem es jorobado —objetó la señora Pullet, pensando que la conversación adquiría un sesgo fúnebre—. Es más natural que a él lo envíen con un clérigo.

—Sí —coincidió el señor Glegg, interpretando la observación de la señora Pullet de modo erróneo—. Debe tener esto en cuenta, vecino Tulliver: es probable que el hijo de Wakem no trabaje nunca y Wakem pretenda hacer de él un caballero, pobre muchacho.

—Glegg —exclamó su esposa en un tono que implicaba que su indignación seguía burbujeando, si bien estaba decidida a contenerla—. Harías mejor dejando quieta la lengua. El señor Tulliver no quiere conocer tu opinión ni tampoco la mía. En este mundo hay personas que lo saben todo mejor que nadie.

—Caramba, pues se diría que usted es una de esas, si nos atenemos a sus palabras —exclamó el señor Tulliver, cuya indignación hervía de nuevo.

—Si no digo nada —contestó la señora Glegg con sorna—. No se me ha pedido consejo y no pienso darlo.

—Entonces, será la primera vez —dijo el señor Tulliver—. Ésa es la única cosa que siempre está dispuesta a dar.

—Tal vez me haya precipitado a la hora de prestar, por no decir que me he apresurado a dar —repuso la señora Glegg—. He prestado dinero a algunos, aunque quizás tenga que arrepentirme de prestar dinero a la familia.

—Vamos, vamos, vamos —intervino el señor Glegg con tono conciliador. Pero el señor Tulliver no estaba dispuesto a que nadie le impidiera responder.

—A cambio de un pagaré y del cinco por ciento, por muy familiar que fuera.

—Hermana —rogó la señora Tulliver—, tómate el vino y permíteme que *t'*ofrezca unas almendras y unas pasas.

—Bessy, lo siento mucho por ti —dijo la señora Glegg, como el perro callejero que aprovecha para dedicar sus ladridos al hombre que no lleva

bastón—. No viene a cuento hablar de almendras y pasas.

—Por Dios, hermana Glegg, no seas tan picajosa —imploró la señora Pullet, soltando unas lagrimitas—. Te puede dar un ataque si te pones tan colorada después de comer… Piensa que acabamos de salir del luto y de quitarnos los vestidos negros… Es muy triste que esto suceda entre hermanas.

—Sin duda, está mal —dijo la señora Glegg—. Hay que ver hasta dónde hemos llegado cuando una hermana invita a otra a su casa para pelearse con ella e insultarla.

—Tranquila, tranquila, Jane. Sé razonable —dijo el señor Glegg.

Pero mientras hablaba, el señor Tulliver, que de ningún modo había dicho lo suficiente para desahogarse, estalló de nuevo.

—¿Quién quiere discutir con usted? —preguntó—. Es usted quien no puede dejar a la gente en paz y tiene que dar siempre la lata. Ni se me pasa por la cabeza discutir con una mujer, siempre que ésta sepa estar en su sitio.

—¡Mi sitio! —exclamó la señora Glegg con voz cada vez más estridente—. Sus mayores, señor Tulliver, muertos y enterrados, me trataban con otro respeto… Aunque yo tengo un marido que se queda sentado tan tranquilo mientras me humillan, cosa que nunca habría pasado si algún miembro de mi familia no hubiera hecho peor boda de lo que le correspondía.

—Ya que habla de eso —dijo el señor Tulliver—, mi familia es tan buena como la suya, e incluso mejor, porque en ella no hay ninguna maldita mujer con mal carácter.

—¡Muy bien! —dijo la señora Glegg, poniéndose en pie—. No sé si te parece bien quedarte ahí sentado oyendo cómo me insultan, Glegg, pero no voy a aguantar en esta casa ni un minuto más. Puedes quedarte si quieres e ir a casa con la calesa, porque yo me voy andando.

—Por Dios, por Dios —dijo el señor Glegg con tono abatido mientras salía de la habitación detrás de su esposa.

—Tulliver, ¿cómo has podido decir estas cosas? —exclamó la señora Tulliver con lágrimas en los ojos.

—Que se vaya —exclamó el señor Tulliver, demasiado enfadado para que lo ablandaran las lágrimas—, que se vaya, y cuanto antes, mejor: así no

intentará mandarme.

—Hermana Pullet —rogó la señora Tulliver, con gesto impotente—, ¿crees que serviría de algo que fueras tras ella e intentaras calmarla?

—No, será mejor que no —dijo el señor Deane—. Ya lo arreglaran otro día.

—Entonces, hermanas, ¿vamos a ver a los niños? —preguntó la señora Tulliver, secándose las lágrimas.

Ninguna otra propuesta podía haber sido más oportuna. En cuanto las mujeres salieron de la sala, el señor Tulliver se sintió como si hubieran limpiado el aire de moscas molestas. Pocas cosas le gustaban más que charlar con el señor Deane, cuya estrecha dedicación a los negocios raras veces les permitía ese placer. Consideraba que el señor Deane era el «más capacísim» de sus conocidos y, además, tenía una lengua rápida y cáustica que suponía un agradable contrapunto a la tendencia en este sentido del señor Tulliver, que permanecía en estado embrionario o muda. En cuanto las mujeres se marcharon, pudieron hablar de cosas serias sin interrupciones frívolas, intercambiar puntos de vista en relación al duque de Wellington, cuya actitud en lo referente a la Cuestión Católica había proyectado una luz completamente nueva sobre su carácter, y comentar un poco su comportamiento en la batalla de Waterloo, que nunca habría ganado sin el respaldo de muchísimos ingleses, para no mencionar a Bucher y los prusianos que, como había oído decir el señor Tulliver a una persona muy versada sobre el tema, habían aparecido en el momento oportuno; si bien en este punto se produjo una ligera discrepancia cuando el señor Deane señaló que no estaba dispuesto a confiar mucho en los prusianos, ya que la construcción de sus barcos, junto con el carácter insatisfactorio de las transacciones de cerveza de Danzig, lo inclinaban no tener en gran estima el valor prusiano en general. Sintiéndose derrotado en este terreno, el señor Tulliver pasó a expresar sus temores de que el país nunca volviera a ser lo que había sido; pero el señor Deane, vinculado a una empresa con beneficios cada vez mayores, tendía a una visión más alegre del presente y tenía algunos detalles que dar en relación con el estado de las importaciones, especialmente de curtidos y pieles, lo que alivió la imaginación del señor Tulliver proyectando a una perspectiva más lejana la

época en que el país fuera presa completa de los papistas y los radicales, y los hombres honrados ya no tuvieran cabida en él.

El tío Pullet escuchaba sentado todos estos elevados asuntos con los ojos brillantes. No entendía nada de política y pensaba que tal conocimiento se debía a algún don natural pero, por lo que podía deducir, ese duque de Wellington no valía gran cosa.

Capítulo VIII

El señor Tulliver muestra su lado más débil

—Imagina que la hermana Glegg te pide que le devuelvas el dinero: te pondría en un aprieto tener que reunir quinientas libras en este momento —dijo la señora Tulliver a su marido aquella noche, mientras efectuaba un repaso quejumbroso del día.

La señora Tulliver llevaba trece años viviendo con su marido y, sin embargo, conservaba intacta la capacidad de decir cosas que lo empujaban en dirección opuesta a la que ella deseaba. Algunas personas consiguen ser siempre como el primer día, de la misma manera que un anciano pececillo de colores parece conservar hasta el final la juvenil ilusión de que es posible nadar en línea recta en el interior de una pecera redonda. La señora Tulliver era un pececillo afable y, tras golpearse la cabeza contra la misma superficie resistente durante trece años, aquel día insistía con prontitud inmarcesible.

Su comentario empujó al señor Tulliver al convencimiento de que no le costaría nada reunir quinientas libras y cuando la señora Tulliver insistió en preguntar cómo las conseguiría sin hipotecar el molino y la casa —cosa que, según él había asegurado siempre, nunca haría—, puesto que en los tiempos que corrían la gente no estaba muy dispuesta a prestar dinero sin garantías, el señor Tulliver, irritándose, declaró que la señora Glegg podía reclamar su dinero si le apetecía: lo pidiera o no, él estaba decidido a devolvérselo inmediatamente. No estaba dispuesto a depender de las hermanas de su esposa. Cuando un hombre se casaba con una familia con

toda una camada de hembras, mucho tendría que aguantar si se lo toleraba. Y él no se lo iba a tolerar.

La señora Tulliver lloró con abundantes lágrimas y escaso ruido mientras se ponía el gorro de dormir, pero no tardó en caer en un plácido sueño, acunada por el pensamiento de que al día siguiente hablaría de todo ello con su hermana Pullet, cuando llevara los niños a Garum Firs para tomar el té. No esperaba que la conversación cambiara las cosas, aunque parecía imposible que los acontecimientos del pasado fueran tan obstinados como para permanecer inamovibles a pesar de los lamentos.

Su marido estuvo despierto mucho más rato, ya que él también pensaba en la visita que realizaría al día siguiente y sus ideas no eran tan vagas ni balsámicas como las de su amable compañera.

Cuando el señor Tulliver se encontraba bajo la influencia de un sentimiento poderoso, tendía a actuar con una prontitud que podría parecer contraria a la dolorosa idea que tanto le gustaba repetir acerca de lo enredoso de los asuntos humanos; pero no es improbable que hubiera una relación directa entre ambos fenómenos, aparentemente contradictorios, puesto que tengo observado que no hay como tirar bruscamente de una sola hebra para obtener la nítida sensación de que una madeja está enmarañada. Debido a esta diligencia, al día siguiente, poco después de comer —el señor Tulliver no era dispéptico—, se encontró montado a caballo, de camino a Basset para visitar a su hermana Moss y a su esposo. Tras decidir de modo irrevocable que devolvería el préstamo de quinientas libras a la señora Glegg, se le ocurrió pensar que, puesto que tenía un pagaré por las trescientas libras prestadas a su cuñado Moss, si éste podía devolverle el dinero en un plazo acordado, se amortiguaría en gran medida la consideración errónea que merecía el atrevido paso del señor Tulliver a los ojos de esas personas débiles que necesitan saber cómo debe hacerse una cosa antes de estar seguras de que será fácil llevarla a cabo.

La situación del señor Tulliver no era nueva ni sorprendente pero, como en otras cuestiones cotidianas, sin duda tendría un efecto acumulativo que se percibiría a largo plazo: se le tenía por hombre mucho más acaudalado de lo que era en realidad. Y como tendemos a creer lo que el mundo cree de nosotros, solía pensar en el fracaso y la ruina con la misma piedad remota

que siente un hombre enjuto y cuellilargo al oír que su pletórico vecino cuellicorto ha sufrido una apoplejía. Estaba acostumbrado a oír agradables bromas sobre las ventajas de su situación por ser dueño de un molino y poseer un buen trozo de tierra, y estas bromas lo mantenían en la idea de que era un hombre de considerable fortuna. Daban un agradable sabor al vaso de cerveza que tomaba los días de mercado y, si no hubiera sido por la regularidad de los pagos semestrales, el señor Tulliver habría olvidado que pesaba una hipoteca de dos mil libras sobre el molino y la casa. La culpa no era totalmente suya, puesto que mil libras correspondían a la cantidad que había tenido que dar a su hermana cuando se casó, y un hombre que tiene vecinos capaces de recurrir a los tribunales difícilmente podrá cancelar una hipoteca, especialmente si goza de la buena consideración de sus amistades, dispuestas a pedirle cien libras con una garantía demasiado elevada para que aparezca escrita en un pergamino. Nuestro amigo Tulliver era buena persona y no le gustaba negar nada, ni siquiera a una hermana que no sólo había llegado al mundo de modo superfluo —cosa habitual en las hermanas y que tenía como consecuencia la necesidad de hipotecarse—, sino que se había lanzado al matrimonio y había coronado sus errores con un octavo hijo. El señor Tulliver era consciente de ser un poco débil en este punto, pero se disculpaba pensando que la pobre Gritty era una chica guapa antes de casarse con Moss, e incluso algunas veces, cuando lo decía, le temblaba un poco la voz. No obstante, aquella mañana tenía un talante más próximo al de un hombre de negocios y durante el camino por los senderos de Basset —estriados por profundos surcos, tan alejados de cualquier mercado que la tarea de conseguir una cosecha y estiércol consumía la mayor parte de los beneficios de los habitantes de las pobres tierras de aquella parroquia—, fue desarrollando una justa irritación contra Moss, aquel hombre sin capital que, en caso de que se extendieran plagas de morriña y añublo seguro que no se libraba, y que, cuanto más intentabas ayudarlo a salir del fango, más se hundía. En realidad, no le iría nada mal verse obligado a devolver las trescientas libras: haría que anduviera con más cuidado y no actuara de modo tan alocado con la lana como el año anterior: sin duda, el señor Tulliver había sido demasiado blando con su cuñado y como le había perdonado los intereses durante dos años, Moss era capaz de pensar que no

debía molestarse por el principal. Pero el señor Tulliver estaba decidido a no fomentar más actitudes tan poco responsables y el viaje por los caminos de Basset no tendía a debilitar la decisión de un hombre calmando su enfado. Las profundas huellas secas de los cascos de las caballerías, grabadas durante los fangosos días del invierno, lo sacudían de vez en cuando y le hacían proferir alguna imprudente pero estimulante imprecación contra el padre de los abogados que, mediante su pezuña o de otro modo, algo tendría que ver con el estado de los caminos. La abundancia de malas tierras y vallas descuidadas que veían sus ojos, aunque no pertenecieran a la granja de su hermano Moss, contribuían en gran medida a su descontento con aquel desgraciado agrónomo. Si aquellos no eran los barbechos de Moss bien podrían haberlo sido: todos los campos de Basset eran iguales; en opinión del señor Tulliver, aquella era una parroquia indigente y, sin duda, su opinión no carecía de fundamento. Basset tenía malas tierras, caminos miserables, un vicario y un terrateniente absentistas y pobres, e incluso lo era el medio párroco que le correspondía. Si alguna persona profundamente impresionada por el poder de la mente humana para triunfar sobre las circunstancias adversas afirmara que los parroquianos de Basset tal vez pertenecieran a una clase de gente superior, nada tendría que objetar a esa afirmación abstracta. Lo único que sé es que, de hecho, el espíritu de Basset estaba a la altura de las circunstancias. Los embarrados caminos, verdes o arcillosos, que para la mirada forastera parecían no conducir a ningún lugar, sino, simplemente, de uno a otro, en realidad llevaban, con paciencia, a una lejana carretera; sin embargo, los pies de Basset se encaminaban con mayor frecuencia hacia un antro de disipación conocido oficialmente con el nombre de *Markis o'Grandby*, si bien los habituales lo llamaban «la casa de Dickinso». Tal vez no pareciera muy tentadora aquella gran sala con el suelo cubierto de arena, frío olor a tabaco mezclado con posos de cerveza, el señor Dickinson apoyado contra la jamba de la puerta mientras su granujiento rostro de expresión triste parecía tan irrelevante a la luz del día como la oscilante vela de la víspera; y, sin embargo, la mayoría de los hombres de Basset encontraba el lugar fatalmente atractivo cuando pasaban por delante hacia las cuatro de la tarde de un día de invierno; y si cualquier esposa de Basset deseaba indicar que

su marido no era un hombre que buscara placeres, difícilmente podría decirlo con más énfasis que afirmando que no gastaba ni un chelín en Dickinson en todo el año. La señora Moss lo había dicho de su marido en más de una ocasión cuando su hermano se mostraba propenso a encontrarle defectos, como sin duda sucedía aquel día. Y nada podía calmar menos al señor Tulliver que el portón de la granja, pues en cuanto intentó abrirlo con la fusta se comportó como hacen las puertas que han perdido la bisagra superior con el consiguiente peligro para las espinillas, tanto equinas como humanas. Estaba a punto de desmontar y conducir el caballo por la tierra mojada del corral —situado en una hondonada a la triste sombra de los grandes cobertizos de madera— hasta el caserón en ruinas emplazado en lo más alto de terreno cuando la oportuna aparición de un vaquero le permitió seguir el plan previsto de no descabalgar en toda la visita. Cuando un hombre pretende comportarse con dureza debe quedarse sobre la silla y hablar desde arriba, por encima de los ojos suplicantes, dominando el lejano horizonte. La señora Moss había oído el sonido de los cascos del caballo y cuando apareció su hermano estaba ya ante la puerta de la cocina con una débil sonrisa cansada en el rostro y un niño de ojos negros en los brazos. La señora Moss guardaba un pálido parecido con su hermano: la manita que el bebé le ponía en la mejilla mostraba con mayor crudeza su tinte apagado.

—*M'*alegro de verte, hermano —dijo ella con tono afectuoso—. No *t'*esperaba, ¿cómo estás?

—Oh, bastante bien, señora Moss… Bastante bien —contestó el hermano deliberadamente frío, como si la posición de la mujer no le permitiera formular preguntas como aquella. Ella advirtió de inmediato que su hermano no estaba de buen humor: sólo la llamaba señora Moss cuando estaba enfadado y cuando se encontraban en público. Sin embargo, ella creía que formaba parte del mundo natural el que los pobres recibieran desaires. La señora Moss no pretendía defender la igualdad entre los seres humanos: era una mujer paciente, fecunda y de aspecto descuidado.

—¿Está tu marido en casa? —añadió el señor Tulliver tras una pausa durante la cual cuatro niños salieron corriendo, como los polluelos cuya madre se ha eclipsado súbitamente detrás del gallinero.

—No —contestó la señora Moss—, pero está en el campo de patatas, allá lejos. Georgy, corre al campo y dile a tu padre que ha venido tu tío. ¿Quieres desmontar, hermano, y tomar algo?

—No, no. No puedo descabalgar: tengo que irme a casa directamente —dijo el señor Tulliver, mirando a lo lejos.

—¿Y cómo están la señora Tulliver y los niños? —preguntó la señora Moss humildemente, sin atreverse a insistir en su invitación.

—Oh, bastante bien. Tom irá a un colegio nuevo para el trimestre de verano: es un gran gasto para mí. Me viene muy mal que no se me paguen las deudas.

—*T'*agradecería que tuvieras la bondad de dejar que tus niños vinieran a visitar a sus primos algún día. Los pequeños tienen muchísimas ganas de ver a la prima Maggie. Y yo también, que soy su madrina y tanto *l'*aprecio: ya sabes que celebramos que venga tanto como podemos. Y sé que le gusta venir, porque es una niña encantadora… ¡y qué rápida y qué lista es!

Si la señora Moss hubiera sido una de las mujeres más astutas del mundo en lugar de ser una de las más simples no se le habría ocurrido mejor idea para predisponer a su favor a su hermano que alabar a Maggie. Pocas veces el señor Tulliver oía alabanzas espontáneas a la «mocit»: por lo general, los demás le dejaban a él la tarea de insistir en sus méritos. No obstante, en casa de su tía Moss, Maggie siempre era vista bajo la mejor luz: aquel era su refugio, el lugar donde se encontraba más allá de la ley. Si volcaba algo, se ensuciaba los zapatos o se rompía la bata, todas estas cosas eran normales en casa de su tía Moss. A pesar de sí mismo, los ojos del señor Tulliver se suavizaron y no apartó la vista de su hermana al hablar.

—Sí, y a ti te quiere más que a sus otras tías, según creo. Se parece a nuestra familia: no tiene nada de la familia de su madre.

—Dice Moss que es como yo era —dijo la señora Moss—, aunque yo nunca fui tan rápida ni amiga de los libros. Creo que mi Lizzy es como ella: es un rato lista. Ven, Lizzy, hija, y deja que te vea tu tío: has crecido tan aprisa que casi no te conoce.

Lizzy, una niña de siete años de ojos negros, avanzó empujada por su madre con actitud muy tímida, porque los pequeños Moss sentían gran reverencia por su tío del molino de Dorlcote. Su expresión era notablemente

menos fogosa e intensa que la de Maggie, de modo que la comparación no resultaba totalmente halagadora para el amor paterno del señor Tulliver.

—Sí, se parecen un poco —admitió, mirando amablemente a la pequeña figura del delantal manchado—. Las dos han salido a nuestra madre. Ya has tenido suficientes niñas, Gritty —añadió en un tono a medias entre la piedad y el reproche.

—Cuatro, benditas sean —contestó la señora Moss con un suspiro, acariciando el cabello de Lizzy a ambos lados de la frente—. Tantas como chicos. Un chico por cada chica.

—Ah, pero deben despabilar y luchar por sí mismas —dijo el señor Tulliver, advirtiendo que su severidad se iba relajando e intentando apuntalarla con una buena indirecta—. No deben depender de sus hermanos.

—No, pero espero que sus hermanos quieran a las pobrecitas y recuerrden que son del mismo padre y de la misma madre: los chicos no serán por ello más pobres —dijo la señora Moss con un súbito destello, como si fuera un fuego casi extinguido.

El señor Tulliver dio un golpecito al caballo en el flanco, tiró de las riendas y exclamó, ante el asombro del inocente animal:

—¡Estate quieto!

—Y cuantos más sean, más tendrán que quererse —prosiguió la señora Moss, mirando a sus hijos con intención didáctica. Pero se volvió de nuevo hacia su hermano para añadir—: Espero que tu chico sea siempre bueno con su hermana, aunque solo sean dos, como tú y yo, hermano.

Esta flecha se clavó directamente en el corazón del señor Tulliver. No tenía una imaginación rápida pero como Maggie permanecía siempre en su pensamiento, no le costó imaginar el paralelismo entre la relación que mantenía con su hermana y el trato entre Tom y Maggie. Se preguntó si la mocita sería pobre y su hermano Tom se comportaría con ella con dureza.

—Sí, sí, Gritty —contestó el molinero, adoptando, por primera vez, un tono cálido—. Pero yo siempre he hecho por ti cuanto estaba en mi mano —añadió, como defendiéndose de un reproche.

—No lo niego, hermano, y no soy desagradecida —dijo la pobre señora Moss, demasiado reventada por el trabajo y los niños para ser orgullosa—.

Aquí está el padre de los niños: has tardado mucho, Moss.

—¿Te parece mucho? —exclamó el señor Moss, sin aliento y ofendido —. He venido corriendo. ¿No quiere descabalgar, señor Tulliver?

—Bueno, bajaré y charlaré un poco contigo en el huerto —dijo el señor Tulliver, pensando que se mostraría más resuelto si su hermana no se encontraba presente.

Desmontó y entró con el señor Moss en el huerto, en dirección a una vieja pérgola de tejo, mientras su hermana se quedaba dando palmaditas al bebé en la espalda y mirándolos con inquietud.

Su entrada en la pérgola de tejo sorprendió a varias gallinas que se recreaban cavando profundos agujeros en el suelo polvoriento, e inmediatamente se marcharon con gran revuelo y cacareo. El señor Tulliver se sentó en el banco y, tras golpear el suelo aquí y allá con la fusta, como si buscara un hueco, inició la conversación comentando con cierto tono gruñón:

—Vaya, así que has vuelto a plantar trigo en el cercado de la esquina. Y sin echar ni un poco de abono. No vas a sacar nada este año.

El señor Moss, que cuando se casó con la señorita Tulliver era considerado el muchacho más apuesto y atildado de Basset, llevaba ahora una barba de casi una semana y tenía el aire deprimido y sin esperanza de un caballo de labor.

—Los granjeros pobres como yo hacen lo que pueden —rezongó con aire paciente—: En cambio, los que tienen dinero de sobra ponen en el terreno la mitad de lo que piensan sacar de él.

—No sé quién tiene dinero de sobra, a menos que te refieras a los que pueden pedirlo prestado sin pagar intereses —dijo el señor Tulliver, deseoso de discutir un poco: era el modo más natural y sencillo de pedirle que le devolviera el dinero.

—Ya sé que no estoy al día con los intereses —dijo el señor Moss—, pero el año pasado tuve muy mala suerte con la lana, y la parienta ha pasado tanto tiempo en cama que las cosas han ido peor que de costumbre.

—Sí —exclamó el señor Tulliver en tono burlón—: a algunos, las cosas nunca les salen bien. Los sacos vacíos no se sostienen en pie.

—Bien, no sé qué reproche puede hacerme, Tulliver —dijo Moss con aire de desaprobación—. Ningún jornalero trabaja tanto como yo.

—¿Y de qué sirve, cuando un hombre se casa y no tiene otro capital para trabajar en su granja que el dinero de su esposa? —preguntó el señor Tulliver secamente—. Siempre he estado en contra, pero ninguno de los dos quiso escucharme. Y ya no puedo prescindir de mi dinero durante más tiempo, porque tengo que pagar quinientas libras a la señora Glegg y *m'*espera el gasto de Tom, de modo que voy a necesitarlo. Tienes que mirar tus cosas y ver cómo me devuelves las trescientas libras.

—Así haré, si eso es lo que quiere —contestó Moss, mirando al frente con aire inexpresivo—, lo venderemos todo y terminaremos con esto. Tendré que desprenderme de todo el ganado que tengo para pagarle a usted y al dueño del terreno.

No cabe duda de que los parientes pobres son irritantes: su existencia es innecesaria y, además, casi siempre son personas incorrectas. El señor Tulliver había conseguido irritarse con el señor Moss tanto como deseaba, de modo que pudo decir enfadado mientras se ponía en pie:

—Bien, haz lo que puedas. Yo no puedo encontrar dinero para los demás y para mí también, debo velar por mis asuntos y por mi familia. No puedo prescindir de mi dinero durante más tiempo, de modo que debes devolvérmelo tan pronto como puedas.

El señor Tulliver salió de la pérgola bruscamente mientras decía esta última frase y, sin volverse para mirar al señor Moss, se dirigió hacia la puerta de la cocina, donde el hijo mayor le sujetaba el caballo y donde su hermana lo aguardaba alarmada e inquieta, aunque los gorjeos y manotazos del niño pequeño sobre su rostro mortecino amenizaban la espera. La señora Moss tenía ocho hijos, pero nunca podría superar la tristeza por los gemelos que no sobrevivieron: en cambio, para el señor Moss su partida supuso cierto consuelo.

—¿No quieres entrar, hermano? —preguntó, mirando inquieta a su marido, que se acercaba caminando lentamente, mientras que el señor Tulliver tenía ya el pie en el estribo.

—No, no. Adiós —dijo él, girando la cabeza del caballo y partiendo.

No había hombre más decidido que el señor Tulliver hasta que salió por la puerta del patio y avanzó por el estropeado camino; pero antes de que llegara a la siguiente curva, que le haría perder de vista la deteriorada granja, un pensamiento repentino pareció golpearlo, porque detuvo el caballo y permaneció inmóvil en el mismo lugar durante dos o tres minutos, durante los cuales volvió la cabeza de lado a lado con tristeza, como si examinara un asunto doloroso desde varios puntos de vista. No cabía duda de que, tras el arrebato, el señor Tulliver volvía a sentirse dominado por la sensación de que este mundo es un lugar muy enredoso. Hizo volver grupas al caballo, retrocedió lentamente y se abandonó al sentimiento que había determinado el giro al decir en voz alta, mientras golpeaba al caballo:

—¡Pobre mocita! Cuando yo me muera lo probable es que no tenga a nadie más que Tom.

Varios jóvenes Moss describieron el regreso del señor Tulliver al patio e inmediatamente corrieron a su madre con la noticia, de modo que cuando su hermano entró, la señora Moss estaba de nuevo en la puerta. Había estado llorando, pero ahora mecía al bebé en los brazos para que se durmiera y, cuando su hermano la miró, no dio muestras de pena y se limitó a decir:

—El padre de los chicos ha vuelto al campo, ¿quieres hablar con él, hermano?

—No, Gritty, no —dijo el señor Tulliver con tono amable—. No *t'*inquietes, eso es todo. Ya me las arreglaré sin el dinero, pero debéis ir con cuidado y ahorrar todo lo que podáis.

Las lágrimas de la señora Moss brotaron de nuevo ante esta inesperada muestra de amabilidad y no pudo decir nada.

—¡Vamos, vamos! Ya te traeré a la mocita para que os vea. La traeré con Tom, antes de que él se vaya al colegio. No *t'*inquietes. Siempre me portaré contigo como un buen hermano.

—Gracias por tu palabra, hermano —dijo la señora Moss, secándose las lágrimas; después se volvió hacia Lizzy y le dijo—: corre a buscar el huevo de colores para la prima Maggie.

Lizzy entró en la casa corriendo y reapareció rápidamente con un paquetito de papel.

—Es un huevo duro coloreado con hebras de hilo: ha quedado muy bonito, lo hicieron especialmente para Maggie. ¿Se lo llevarás en el bolsillo?

—Sí, sí —contestó el señor Tulliver, guardándolo cuidadosamente en el bolsillo de la chaqueta—. Adiós.

Y así regresó el respetable molinero por los caminos de Basset más desconcertado que antes al pensar en medios y modos, pero con la sensación de haber escapado al peligro. Se le había ocurrido pensar que si se comportaba con dureza con su hermana, tal vez eso hiciera que Tom fuera también duro con Maggie en un futuro lejano, cuando su padre ya no estuviera allí para ponerse de su parte; porque la gente simple, como nuestro amigo Tulliver, es capaz de vestir sentimientos intachables con ideas erróneas y ésta era su confusa manera de explicarse que su amor y su inquietud por «la mocit» le habían hecho adoptar una actitud más sensible con su hermana.

Capítulo IX

De camino a Garurm Firs

Mientras los posibles problemas del futuro de Maggie ocupaban la mente de su padre, la niña experimentaba tan solo la amargura del presente. La infancia no piensa en el futuro ni recuerda las penas del pasado.

Lo cierto era que el día había empezado mal para Maggie. El placer de contemplar a Lucy y la perspectiva de la visita por la tarde a Garum Firs, donde oiría la caja de música del tío Pullet, se estropeó hacia las once con la llegada del peluquero de Saint Ogg's, el cual se refirió en los términos más severos al estado de su cabello.

—¡Mira! ¡Ay, ay, ay! —dijo, asiendo un mechón tras otro con una mezcla de conmiseración y disgusto que para la imaginación de Maggie equivalía a la más dura expresión de la opinión pública. El señor Rappit, el peluquero, cuyos untuosos rizos de la coronilla se alzaban ondulados como la simulada pirámide de llamas de una urna monumental, en aquel momento le parecía el más temible de sus coetáneos y estaba decidida a no volver a pasar por su calle, en Saint Ogg's, durante el resto de su vida.

Además, dado que los preparativos para una visita constituían siempre un asunto muy serio en la familia Dodson, Martha tuvo que recoger el cuarto de la señora Tulliver una hora antes que de costumbre para que el momento de sacar las mejores ropas no se retrasara, como sucedía algunas veces en familias con criterios laxos en las que las cintas no se enrollaban nunca, apenas había nada envuelto en papel de seda y se consideraba normal tratar de cualquier modo la ropa de los domingos. A las doce, la

señora Tulliver llevaba ya el traje de las visitas con una bata de holanda de color pardo, como si fuera un mueble tapizado en raso protegido de las moscas, y Maggie fruncía el ceño y se retorcía como si intentara escapar del más áspero cuello de encaje mientras su madre la regañaba.

—Quieta, Maggie, no hagas eso. ¡No hagas muecas!

Las mejillas de Tom brillaban en agradable contraste con su mejor traje azul, que lucía con adecuada calma después de conseguir, tras una pequeña lucha, su objetivo principal cuando cambiaba de ropa: traspasar todo el contenido de los bolsillos cotidianos a los que llevara puestos.

En cuanto a Lucy, estaba tan bonita y pulcra como el día anterior: sus vestidos nunca sufrían accidentes y nunca se sentía incómoda con ellos, de modo que contemplaba con sorprendida compasión cómo Maggie se debatía y hacía mohínes por encima de aquel cuello insoportable. Maggie se lo habría arrancado sin vacilar si no la hubiera frenado el recuerdo de la reciente humillación sufrida por culpa de su pelo, de modo que se limitaba a agitarse, retorcerse y comportarse con irritación mientras construían castillos de naipes hasta la hora de comer, entretenimiento adecuado para niños y niñas vestidos con sus mejores galas. Tom era capaz de construir una pirámide perfecta, pero las de Maggie nunca resistían la colocación de la cubierta: siempre sucedía lo mismo con las cosas que fabricaba Maggie, y Tom había llegado a la conclusión de que las chicas eran incapaces de hacer nada. No obstante, resultó que Lucy era extraordinariamente hábil con los castillos de naipes: colocaba las cartas con tanta suavidad y las movía tan despacio que Tom condescendió en admirar sus edificios tanto como los propios, especialmente después de que ella le pidiera que le enseñara. Maggie también habría abandonado sus fracasados castillos para admirar y alabar los de Lucy sin enfado alguno si el cuello no le hubiese fastidiado tanto y si Tom no se hubiese reído de modo desconsiderado y la hubiese llamado tonta cuando se desmoronó su construcción.

—¡No te rías de mí, Tom! —exclamó enfadada—. No soy tonta. Sé muchas cosas que tú no sabes.

—¡Oh, estoy seguro, señorita Malaspulgas! Yo nunca sabría tener tanto mal genio ni hacer tantas muecas. Lucy tampoco las hace. Me gusta más Lucy que tú: ojalá fuera ella mi hermana.

—Eres malo y cruel por desear esas cosas —gritó Maggie, levantándose del suelo rápidamente y tirando la maravillosa pagoda de Tom. En realidad no quería hacerlo, pero todo parecía indicar lo contrario; Tom se puso blanco de ira, aunque no dijo nada: deseaba pegarle, pero sabía que era de cobardes pegar a una chica y Tom Tulliver había tomado la decisión de no actuar jamás con cobardía.

Maggie contempló desolada y aterrorizada como Tom, completamente pálido, se levantaba y se alejaba de las ruinas dispersas de su pagoda mientras Lucy los miraba enmudecida, como un gatito que levanta la vista del plato.

—¡Oh, Tom! —exclamó Maggie, por fin, acercándose a él—. No quería tirarla, de verdad, de verdad, de verdad.

En lugar de hacerle caso, Tom sacó dos o tres guisantes secos del bolsillo y los disparó contra la ventana con la uña del pulgar; al principio sin blanco concreto, pero no tardó en adoptar el propósito de dar a un achacoso moscardón que exhibía su imbecilidad a los rayos del sol primaveral, sin duda contra los designios de la naturaleza, que había creado a Tom y los guisantes para la pronta destrucción de aquel débil ejemplar.

Así quedó malograda la mañana para Maggie, y la persistente frialdad de Tom para con ella durante el paseo le impidió disfrutar del sol y del aire fresco. Tom llamó a Lucy para enseñarle un nido a medio hacer, sin preocuparse por mostrárselo a Maggie, y descortezó una vara de fresno para Lucy y otra para él sin ofrecer ninguna a su hermana. Cuando Lucy le preguntó: «¿No te gustaría tener una, Maggie?», Tom se hizo el sordo.

Sin embargo, el espectáculo del pavo real que desplegaba oportunamente su cola en lo alto de un muro del corral, en el momento en que llegaron a Garum Firs, bastó para distraerlos momentáneamente de sus agravios personales. Y aquello era sólo el comienzo de las bellezas de Garum Firs. Los animales del corral eran todos preciosos: había gallinas enanas de Bantam con pintas y moño; despeinadas gallinas frisias; gallinas de guinea que revoloteaban, chillaban y dejaban caer bonitas plumas moteadas; palomas buchonas y una urraca domesticada. Y más aún: una cabra y un perro con bellas manchas, mitad mastín, mitad bull-dog, grande como un león. Y por doquier se alzaban cercados con puertas blancas y

veletas de formas variadas, y todos los senderos estaban empedrados con guijarros dispuestos en lindos dibujos: nada era vulgar en Garum Firs y Tom incluso creía que el tamaño excepcional que allí tenían los sapos se debía simplemente a lo extraordinario de la finca del tío Pullet, propietario de sus tierras. Como era natural, los sapos arrendatarios eran más delgados. En cuanto a la casa, no era menos notable: estaba estucada en un blanco deslumbrante y constaba de un edificio central retranqueado y dos alas con torrecillas almenadas.

El tío Pullet había visto desde la ventana al grupo que se acercaba. Y se apresuró a quitar la barra y la cadena de la puerta principal, mantenidas siempre en este estado de defensa por miedo a los vagabundos, los cuales tal vez supieran de la existencia de la vitrina de cristal de la entrada, llena de pájaros disecados, y podría ocurrírseles asaltar la casa para llevárselos agarrándolos por la cabeza. La tía Pullet apareció también en el umbral y tan pronto como su hermana pudo oírla, gritó:

—¡Por Dios, Bessy, detén a los niños! ¡No los dejes subir las escaleras! Sally bajará ahora el felpudo viejo y el trapo del polvo para limpiarles los zapatos.

Los felpudos de las puertas de la señora Pullet nunca estaban destinados a limpiar los zapatos: incluso el limpiabarros contaba con un ayudante para el trabajo sucio. Tom siempre se rebelaba contra esta limpieza de zapatos, que consideraba un atentado a la dignidad de un varón. Veía en ella el comienzo de los desagradables incidentes de las visitas a casa de la tía Pullet, donde en una ocasión se le obligó a permanecer sentado con las botas envueltas en trapos; hecho que tal vez corrija la conclusión excesivamente apresurada de que las visitas a Garum Firs constituían un gran placer para un joven caballero aficionado a los animales… Es decir, aficionado a tirarles piedras.

El siguiente incidente desagradable únicamente afectó a su compañía femenina: consistió en subir la encerada escalera de roble. Ésta tenía unas magníficas alfombras, enrolladas y guardadas en un trastero, de forma que la ascensión por los resbaladizos peldaños podría haber servido, en tiempos bárbaros, como prueba para una ordalía que nadie, excepto las personas de virtud intachable, podría superar sin romperse un hueso. La debilidad de la

tía Sofía por estas pulidas escaleras constituía siempre tema de amargos reproches por parte de la señora Glegg; pero la señora Tulliver no osó hacer comentario alguno y se limitó a alegrarse cuando ella y los niños llegaron al rellano sanos y salvos.

—La señora Gray *m'*ha mandado a casa la capota nueva, Bessy —anunció la señora Pullet en tono lastimero mientras su hermana se ajustaba la cofia.

—¿Ah sí, hermana? —contestó la señora Tulliver con aire de gran interés—. ¿Y qué te parece?

—Temo que se estropee con el roce de las ropas del armario con tanto trajín de sacarla y volverla a guardar —dijo la señora Pullet, sacando un manojo de llaves del bolsillo y examinándolo con inquietud—, pero sería una lástima que te fueras sin verla. Nunca se sabe lo que puede ocurrir.

La señora Pullet meneó la cabeza lentamente al hacer esta solemne observación que la decidió a escoger una llave concreta.

—Temo que te dé mucha molestia enseñármela, hermana —dijo la señora Tulliver—, pero *m'*encantaría ver la corona que *t'*ha hecho.

La señora Pullet se levantó con aire melancólico y abrió una de las puertas de un brillante armario en donde tal vez el lector haya supuesto precipitadamente que se encontraba la capota nueva. Nada de eso. Semejante conclusión sólo podría ser producto de un conocimiento muy superficial de los hábitos de la familia Dodson. La señora Pullet buscaba en ese armario algo pequeño que quedaba oculto entre la ropa blanca: la llave de una puerta.

—Debes venir conmigo al dormitorio bueno —dijo a su hermana.

—¿Pueden venir también las niñas? —preguntó la señora Tulliver al ver que Maggie y Lucy parecían desearlo ansiosamente.

—En fin —contestó la tía Pullet después de reflexionar—; tal vez sea más seguro que vengan; si las dejamos solas pueden toquetearlo todo.

De modo que avanzaron en procesión por el brillante y resbaladizo pasillo, apenas iluminado por la luneta de la ventana situada sobre los cerrados postigos: resultaba todo muy solemne. La señora Pullet se detuvo y abrió una puerta que daba a un lugar más solemne aún que el corredor: una habitación oscura, en la que la débil luz procedente del exterior dejaba

ver lo que parecían los cadáveres de los muebles envueltos en blancos sudarios. Todo lo que no estaba amortajado se encontraba con las patas hacia arriba. Lucy agarró del vestido a Maggie y el corazón de ésta se puso a latir a toda velocidad.

La tía Pullet entreabrió el postigo y procedió a abrir el armario con la llave, con gestos lentos y pesarosos sumamente adecuados a la gravedad de la escena. El delicioso aroma a pétalos de rosa que emergió del armario transformó el proceso de retirada de hoja tras hoja de papel de seda en un hermoso espectáculo, aunque la aparición final de la capota resultó decepcionante para Maggie, que habría preferido algo más sobrenatural. Sin embargo, pocas cosas podrían impresionar más a la señora Tulliver.

—Sophy, nunca más volveré a criticar los sombreros de copa completa —declaró con énfasis tras contemplarlo en silencio durante unos instantes.

Era una gran concesión y la señora Pullet así lo reconoció: tuvo la sensación de que tenía que agradecerlo de algún modo.

—¿Te gustaría ver cómo queda puesto, Bessy? —preguntó con aire abatido—. Abriré un poco más la contraventana.

—Claro, si no *t* 'importa quitarte la cofia —contestó la señora Tulliver.

La señora Pullet se la quitó y dejó a la vista el sedoso cabello castaño en el que sobresalía el promontorio de rizos habitual en las mujeres juiciosas y maduras del momento y, tras colocarse la capota en la cabeza, se dio media vuelta lentamente, como si fuera el maniquí de un pañero.

—En algún momento he pensado que en el lado izquierdo tiene demasiados adornos de cinta. ¿Qué te parece, Bessy? —preguntó la señora Pullet. La señora Tulliver miró con seriedad el punto indicado y ladeó la cabeza.

—Bueno, yo creo que está bien así: si lo tocas a lo mejor *t* 'arrepientes.

—Es verdad —dijo la tía Pullet, quitándose el sombrero y mirándolo con aire reflexivo.

—¿Y cuánto te cobrará por esta capota, Sophy? —preguntó la señora Tulliver, pensando ya en la posibilidad de imitar aquel *chef d'oeuvre* con una pieza de seda que tenía en casa.

La señora Pullet apretó los labios y meneó la cabeza.

—La paga el señor Pullet —susurró—: dijo que quería que tuviera la mejor capota de la iglesia de Garum y que el segundo en calidad la llevara cualquier otra parroquiana.

Empezó a recoger los adornos para devolverlos a su lugar en el armario; sus pensamientos parecían haber tomado un sesgo melancólico porque movía la cabeza en un gesto de negación.

—¡Ay! —exclamó finalmente—. Quizá no me la ponga ni dos veces, Bessy. ¿Quién sabe?

—No digas eso, Sophy —contestó la señora Tulliver—. Espero que este verano recuperes la salud.

—Sí, claro. Pero podría fallecer algún miembro de la familia, como sucedió poco después de que me comprara el sombrero de raso verde. Podría morirse el primo Abbott y es imposible pensar en llevar luto por él durante menos de medio año.

—Eso sí que sería mala suerte —comentó la señora Tulliver, repentinamente absorta en la posibilidad de un fallecimiento inoportuno. No es lo mismo llevar un sombrero el primer año que el segundo: no se disfruta de la misma manera, especialmente ahora que la copa cambia tanto con la moda y no se lleva dos veranos igual.

—En fin, así es el mundo —dijo la señora Pullet, devolviendo la capota al armario y cerrándolo con llave. Permaneció en silencio y negó con la cabeza hasta que salieron de la solemne habitación y se encontraron de nuevo en su dormitorio.

Ay, Bessy —dijo, echándose a llorar—, si no vuelves a ver esta capota hasta que me muera, recuerda que te la enseñé tal día como hoy.

La señora Tulliver consideró que debía entristecerse pero era una mujer de pocas lágrimas, recia y saludable, incapaz de llorar tanto como su hermana Pullet, cosa que lamentaba con frecuencia en los funerales. Cuando ponía todo su empeño en que le brotaran lágrimas de los ojos, sólo conseguía una mueca extraña. Maggie, que las observaba atentamente, tuvo la sensación de que la capota de su tía encerraba algún doloroso misterio y, debido a su juventud, ambas creían que era incapaz de entenderlo; y se enfadó porque sabía que, si se lo explicaban, lo entendería tan bien como cualquier otra cosa.

Cuando bajaron, el señor Pullet comentó, con cierta perspicacia, que adivinaba que su señora había estado enseñando la capota: por eso se habían entretenido tanto. A Tom el tiempo le había parecido todavía más largo, porque se había quedado sentado muy incómodo en el borde de un sofá, justo enfrente de su tío Pullet, que lo contemplaba con ojos grises y brillantes y de vez en cuando se dirigía a él llamándolo «caballeret».

—Bien, caballerete, ¿qué aprendes en el colegio?

Era la pregunta habitual del tío Pullet, ante la cual Tom siempre parecía avergonzado, se pasaba la mano por la cara y contestaba «no lo s». Además, le resultaba tan violento estar sentado téte-á-téte con el tío Pullet que ni siquiera podía mirar los grabados de las paredes, las trampas para moscas o las preciosas macetas: no veía nada más que las polainas de su tío. Este respeto no se debía a la reverencia que pudiera sentir Tom ante la superioridad mental de su tío: en realidad, había decidido que no quería llegar a ser propietario rural porque no quería parecer un individuo tonto de piernas flacas como su tío Pullet: era, en definitiva, un blandengue. La timidez de un chico de ningún modo es indicio de gran reverencia: y mientras uno intenta animarlo, pensando que está abrumado por la conciencia de nuestra edad y sabiduría, lo probable es que esté pensando que uno es un bicho muy raro. El único consuelo que se me ocurre es que probablemente los chicos griegos pensaban lo mismo de Aristóteles. Sólo cuando uno ha dominado a un caballo inquieto o ha azotado a un carretero o sostiene un arma en la mano, estos jóvenes tímidos consideran que es un individuo admirable y digno de envidia. Al menos, estoy seguro de los sentimientos de Tom Tulliver en este punto. En su más tierna infancia, cuando todavía llevaba una gorrita con encaje para salir al exterior, se lo veía con frecuencia espiando a través de las barras de alguna verja y haciendo gestos amenazadores con el pequeño índice mientras regañaba a las ovejas con un gruñido confuso, destinado a provocar terror en los sorprendidos animales: así indicaba, tan temprano, ese deseo de dominio sobre los animales inferiores, tanto domésticos como salvajes —incluidos los escarabajos de mayo, los perros de los vecinos y las hermanas pequeñas —, que siempre ha sido un atributo muy prometedor para la fortuna de nuestra raza. En cambio, el señor Pullet jamás montaba un animal más alto

que un pequeño poni, era el menos rapaz de los hombres y consideraba que las armas de fuego eran cacharros peligrosos capaces de dispararse solos, sin obedecer a los deseos de nadie. De modo que a Tom no le faltaban serios motivos cuando, en una conversación confidencial con un muchacho, describió a su tío Pullet como un papanatas, aunque se acordó de señalar que era un «individuo muy ric».

Las únicas circunstancias atenuantes del téte-á-téte con el tío Pullet era que siempre tenía cerca diversos caramelitos de menta y, cuando la conversación desfallecía, llenaba el vacío proponiendo semejante solaz.

—¿Te gustan los caramelos de menta, caballerete? —preguntaba y si, además, ofrecía el artículo en cuestión, bastaba con una respuesta tácita.

La aparición de las niñas sugirió al tío Pullet la posibilidad de recrearse con las galletitas dulces que también guardaba bajo llave para su consumo particular en días lluviosos; pero en cuanto los niños tuvieron en los dedos la tentadora exquisitez, la tía Pullet manifestó su deseo de que se abstuvieran de comerla hasta que llegara la bandeja con los platos, puesto que las crujientes galletitas llenarían «todo el suel» de migas. A Lucy no le importó mucho, porque la galleta era tan bonita que le daba pena comérsela; Tom aprovechó la oportunidad, mientras los mayores hablaban, para tragársela en dos bocados y masticarla furtivamente. En cuanto a Maggie, que en aquel momento estaba fascinada, como de costumbre, con un grabado de Ulises y Nausícaa que el tío Pullet había comprado como «una bonita estampa de las escritura», dejó caer el pastelito y, con un movimiento desafortunado, lo aplastó con el pie. Aquello fue una fuente de tanta agitación para la tía Pullet y de vergüenza para Maggie que ésta empezó a perder la esperanza de oír la caja de rapé con música aquel día, hasta que, tras reflexionar un poco, se le ocurrió que Lucy estaba lo bastante bien considerada como para lanzarse a pedir que les hiciera sonar una melodía. De modo que se lo susurró a Lucy, y ésta, que siempre hacía lo que se le pedía, se acercó en silencio hasta las rodillas de su tío y sonrojada hasta el cuello, le rogó mientras jugueteaba con el collar que llevaba puesto:

—¿Nos deja oír una canción, tío?

Lucy creía que debido a algún talento excepcional de su tío Pullet, la caja de música para rapé tocaba aquellas melodías tan bonitas, y lo cierto

era que la mayoría de los vecinos de Garum pensaban lo mismo. En primer lugar, el señor Pullet había comprado la caja, sabía cómo darle cuerda y conocía de antemano la canción que iba a sonar; en conjunto, la posesión de aquella «pieza musica» era prueba de que el señor Pullet no era tan inútil como podría pensarse.

Sin embargo, cuando le rogaban que mostrara su destreza, el tío Pullet nunca la rebajaba con un consentimiento excesivamente rápido y por lo general, contestaba: «Ya veremo», sin dar ninguna muestra de conformidad hasta pasados los minutos adecuados. El tío Pullet tenía un programa específico para todas las grandes ocasiones sociales y de esta manera se defendía de la excesiva confusión y del desconcertante libre albedrío.

Tal vez, efectivamente, esta espera en ascuas aumentara el placer de Maggie cuando empezó a sonar aquella música mágica, y por primera vez estuvo a punto de olvidar la carga que sobrellevaba: la conciencia de que Tom estaba enfadado con ella. Mientras sonaba la música del *Hush, ye pretty warbling choir*[5], su rostro conservó una expresión de felicidad y permaneció inmóvil con las manos unidas, ofreciendo una imagen que algunas veces consolaba a su madre con la idea de que Maggie podía parecer bonita de vez en cuando, a pesar de su piel morena. Pero cuando cesó la música mágica, se puso en pie de un brinco y, corriendo hacia Tom, le rodeó el cuello con el brazo.

—¡Oh, Tom! ¡Qué bonito! —exclamó.

Este gesto de cariño no solicitado y, para Tom, inexplicable, provocó de nuevo la irritación del muchacho contra su hermana; pero, lector, si te sientes tentado de creer que fue una condenable muestra de insensibilidad, debo decirte que el chico sostenía un vaso de vino de prímula en la mano y que Maggie le propinó tal sacudida que se derramó la mitad de su contenido.

—¡Mira lo que haces! —contestó con enfado; y habría debido ser tremendamente blandengue para no hacerlo, especialmente cuando su rabia estaba respaldada, como era el caso, por un sentimiento de desaprobación general hacia la conducta de Maggie.

—¿Por qué no te quedas sentada y quietecita, Maggie? —exclamó su madre, enfadada.

—Las niñas que se comportan de esta manera no deben venir a verme —dijo la tía Pullet.

—¡Vaya! Señorita, eres demasiado brusca —apostilló el tío Pullet.

La pobre Maggie se sentó de nuevo. La huella de la música había desaparecido de su espíritu y otra vez se habían adueñado de él los siete diablillos.

La señora Tulliver, previendo que mientras los niños permanecieran en el interior de la casa no tendrían más que travesuras, aprovechó para proponer que, ahora que habían descansado ya tras el paseo, salieran a jugar; la tía Pullet les dio permiso, aunque les encareció que no abandonaran los senderos empedrados del jardín y que, si querían ver cómo daban de comer a las aves, miraran desde lejos, subidos al montador, restricción impuesta desde el día en que Tom corrió tras el pavo real con la ilusoria idea de que el miedo haría que se le cayera alguna pluma.

Los sombreros y las inquietudes maternas habían distraído temporalmente a la señora Tulliver de la pelea con la señora Glegg, pero ahora que veía la gran cuestión de la capota con cierta perspectiva y los niños estaban Ya fuera, regresaron las inquietudes del día anterior.

—Siento un peso tremendo, como nunca he sentido —dijo, iniciando la conversación—, por el modo en que nuestra hermana Glegg se marchó de casa. Nunca he tenido la menor intención *d* 'ofender a una hermana.

—¡Ah! —exclamó la tía Pullet—. Nunca se puede saber lo que hará Jane. No lo comentaría con nadie que no fuera de la familia, con la única excepción del doctor Turnbull, pero creo que Jane vive de manera inadecuada. Se lo he dicho al señor Pullet una y otra vez, y él lo sabe.

—Caramba, como que el lunes hizo una semana que me lo dijiste: fue en cuanto llegamos de tomar el té con ellos —contestó el señor Pullet, sujetándose la rodilla y protegiéndola con el pañuelo del bolsillo, como solía hacer cuando la conversación tomaba un sesgo interesante.

—Seguro que sí —dijo la señora Pullet—, porque tú recuerdas siempre lo que digo mejor que yo misma. Pullet tiene una memoria maravillosa —prosiguió, mirando a su hermana con aire lastimero—. Si él sufriera un ataque, me sentiría perdida, porque él siempre recuerda cuándo debo tomar los medicamentos: ahora tomo tres cosas distintas.

—Están las pastillas de siempre, que toma una noche sí y otra no, y las pastillas nuevas a las once y a las cuatro, y el preparado efervescente cuando le parece oportuno —recitó el señor Pullet de modo entrecortado debido al caramelito que tenía en la lengua.

—Ah, tal vez le iría mejor a Jane si fuera alguna vez al médico, en lugar de mascar ruibarbo cuando le pasa alguna cosa —dijo la señora Tulliver, analizando la cuestión médica en relación con la señora Glegg.

—Es terrible pensar en cómo juega la gente con sus tripas —dijo la tía Pullet, alzando las manos y dejándolas caer—. Eso es ir en contra de la misma Providencia: ¿Para qué existen los médicos sino para llamarlos? Y cuando uno tiene dinero para pagar un médico, no es ni siquiera respetable no hacerlo, ya se lo he dicho a Jane muchas veces. *M* 'avergüenza que lo sepan nuestros conocidos.

—Bueno, no es necesario que *t* 'avergüences —dijo el señor Pullet—, porque, ahora que la señora Sutton se ha ido, el doctor Turnbull no tiene en la parroquia a otro paciente como tú.

—El señor Pullet guarda todos los frascos de mis medicinas, ¿sabes, Bessy? —explicó a la señora Tulliver—. No venderá ninguno. Dice que la gente debería verlos cuando yo haya muerto. Ya llenan dos estantes largos de la despensa. Pero —añadió, echándose a llorar— es probable que no llene el tercero. Podría morirme antes de tomar la docena de frascos del último. Las cajas de pastillas están en el armario de mi dormitorio, ya sabes cuál es, pero de las tabletas no queda nada que enseñar, como no sean las facturas.

—No hables de tu muerte, Sophy —dijo la señora Tulliver—. Si te fueras me quedaría sin nadie para mediar con nuestra hermana Glegg. Y sólo tú puedes conseguir que haga las paces con el señor Tulliver, porque nuestra hermana Deane nunca está de mi parte y, cuando lo está, es inesperado, porque ella comparte muchos puntos de vista con ellos, puesto que tiene una fortuna independiente.

—Bien, tu marido es bastante torpe, Bessy, ya lo sabes —dijo la señora Pullet, afablemente dispuesta a compartir su depresión con su hermana—. Nunca *s*'ha comportado con nuestra familia como debiera. Y los niños han salido a él: el niño es muy travieso y no quiere saber nada de sus tíos y tías,

y la niña es basta y morena. Has tenido mala suerte y lo siento por ti, Bessy. Tú siempre has sido mi hermana favorita y siempre hemos coincidido en nuestras ideas.

—Ya sé que el señor Tulliver es irritable y dice cosas raras —dijo la señora Tulliver, enjugándose una lagrimilla—, pero desde que se casó nunca ha puesto reparo a que mis amistades o mi familia acudiera a casa.

—No quiero pintártelo muy negro, Bessy —dijo la señora Pullet compasiva—, porque estoy segura de que ya tienes bastantes problemas… Como tu marido carga con esa pobre hermana y con sus hijos sobre sus espaldas… y, según dicen, es tan dado a pleitear… Imagino que te dejará en muy mala situación cuando muera, aunque no pienso comentarlo fuera del círculo familiar.

Como es natural, este retrato de su situación no alegró a la señora Tulliver. No era fácil estimular su imaginación, pero no pudo evitar el pensamiento de que su situación era difícil, puesto que los demás así la consideraban.

—Estoy segura, Sophy, de que no puedo hacer más —dijo, sintiéndose obligada a revisar su conducta, no fueran a creer que las desgracias que le auguraban pudieran ser consideradas culpa suya—. Ninguna mujer lucha más que yo por sus hijos. *T* 'aseguro que en la limpieza de esta primavera, descolgué todos los doseles y tapices de las camas y trabajé tanto como las dos doncellas juntas. Y acabo de preparar una espléndida reserva de vino de saúco. Y siempre lo ofrezco junto con el jerez, aunque nuestra hermana Glegg diría que despilfarro. Y me gusta ir bien arreglada por casa, y nadie en la parroquia puede decir nada contra mí porque yo no murmuro, no hago daño a nadie, ni deseo mal a nadie, y mis empanadas de cerdo son de las mejores del vecindario, y tengo la ropa blanca tan ordenada que, si me muriera mañana, no tendría motivos para avergonzarme. Ninguna mujer puede hacer más de lo que es capaz.

—Pero Bessy, todo esto no sirve para nada si tu marido liquida todo el dinero —dijo la señora Pullet, ladeando la cabeza y mirando a su hermana con expresión compasiva—. Si tuvieras que vender todos tus muebles a otras personas, de escaso consuelo te resultaría pensar que los has cuidado bien. Y la ropa marcada con tus iniciales de soltera podría dispersarse por

todo el país. Sería un disgusto para la familia —dijo la señora Pullet, negando lentamente con la cabeza.

—Pero ¿qué puedo hacer, Sophy? —dijo la señora Tulliver—. El señor Tulliver no es hombre que se deje manejar: ni aunque fuera a hablar con el párroco y aprendiera de memoria lo que debo decir a mi marido. Y, además, no pretendo saberlo todo sobre lo que hay que hacer con el dinero. Nunca entenderé los negocios de los hombres, como nuestra hermana Glegg.

—Bueno, en esto eres como yo, Bessy —dijo la señora Pullet. Y me parece que sería mucho más apropiado que Jane se ocupara de que le limpiaran el espejo grande con más frecuencia, que la semana pasada estaba lleno de manchas, en lugar de decir a la gente que tiene más ingresos de los que ella ha tenido nunca lo que debe hacer con su dinero. Pero Jane y yo nunca hemos estado de acuerdo en nada: a ella le gustaban las rayas ya mí los lunares. A ti también te gustan los lunares, Bessy: en esto, siempre hemos estado de acuerdo.

La señora Pullet, conmovida por este último recuerdo, miró a su hermana con aire lastimero.

—Sí, Sophy —dijo la señora Tulliver—. Recuerdo que las dos teníamos una tela de fondo con un lunar blanco, todavía conservo un trocito en una colcha. Y si quisieras ir a ver a nuestra hermana Glegg y la convencieras para que se reconciliara con Tulliver, te lo agradecería mucho. Siempre *t*'has portado conmigo como una buena hermana.

—Pero lo adecuado sería que Tulliver fuera a hacer las paces y se disculpara por hablar de modo tan imprudente. No debería olvidar que le ha prestado dinero —dijo la señora Pullet, cuya parcialidad no le impedía recordar las cuestiones de principio: no olvidaba el respeto debido a las gentes de fortuna independiente.

—De nada sirve hablar de todo esto —se lamentó la señora Tulliver, casi enfadada—. Aunque se lo pidiera de rodillas, Tulliver jamás se humillaría.

—Bien, no esperes que yo convenza a Jane de que pida perdón —dijo la señora Pullet. Es imposible hacer frente a su mal genio: parece como si el mal genio pudiera volverla loca, aunque nunca nadie de nuestra familia ha terminado en un manicomio.

—No pretendo que ella pida perdón —dijo la señora Tulliver—, sólo que haga como si no hubiera pasado nada y no reclame el dinero: no es mucho pedir a una hermana. El tiempo arreglará las cosas, a Tulliver se le olvidará todo y volverán a ser amigos.

Como puedes ver, lector, la señora Tulliver ignoraba que su esposo hubiera tomado la decisión irrevocable de devolver las quinientas libras: ni le pasaba por la cabeza semejante idea.

—Bien, Bessy —dijo la señora Pullet tristemente. No quiero contribuir a tu ruina. No dudaré en ayudarte, si eso es lo que hay que hacer. Y no quiero que nuestras amistades digan que hay disputas en la familia. Se lo diré a Jane: y no *m*'importa ir mañana a su casa, si al señor Pullet le parece bien. ¿Qué dices, Pullet?

—No tengo nada que objetar —dijo el señor Pullet, al que tanto le daba el curso que tomara la pelea siempre que el señor Tulliver no recurriera a él para pedirle dinero. Al señor Pullet le inquietaban sus inversiones y no entendía cómo un hombre podía sentir que su dinero estaba seguro a menos que lo transformara en tierras.

Tras una breve conversación sobre si era adecuado que la señora Tulliver los acompañara en la visita a la señora Glegg, la señora Pullet, tras indicar que era hora de tomar el té, se volvió para buscar una delicada servilleta adamascada y se la prendió a modo de delantalito. Efectivamente, la puerta no tardó en abrirse pero, en lugar de la bandeja del té, Sally introdujo algo tan asombroso que tanto la señora Pullet como la señora Tulliver dejaron escapar un grito, provocando que el señor Pullet se tragara el caramelito: era la quinta vez que le sucedía en toda su vida, señalaría él más tarde.

Capítulo X

Maggie se comporta peor de lo que esperaba

El objeto asombroso que marcó así un hito para el tío Pullet no era otra cosa que la pequeña Lucy con medio lado de su cuerpo, desde el piececito a la capotita, empapado y cubierto de barro, con las dos manitas negras extendidas y expresión lastimera. Para explicar esta aparición sin precedentes en el salón de la tía Pullet, debemos remontarnos al momento en que los tres chicos salieron a jugar al jardín y los pequeños demonios que se habían apoderado del ánimo de Maggie a primeras horas del día regresaron con mayor ímpetu tras una ausencia temporal. Sentía sobre sí el peso de todos los recuerdos desagradables de la mañana cuando Tom, cuyo enfado hacia ella se había reavivado después de que le derramara tontamente el vino de prímula, dijo:

—Ven, Lucy, ven conmigo y se alejó en dirección a la zona donde estaban los sapos, como si Maggie no existiera. Su hermana permaneció a lo lejos con aire de pequeña Medusa con las serpientes cortadas. Como es lógico, Lucy se alegró de que el primo Tom fuera tan amable con ella y encontró muy divertido ver cómo hacía cosquillas a un sapo gordo con un trozo de cuerda a través de una rejilla de hierro. Con todo, Lucy deseó que Maggie también disfrutara del espectáculo, sobre todo porque a buen seguro pondría nombre al sapo y le contaría su historia; a Lucy le encantaban las historias de Maggie, que creía a medias, sobre los seres vivos que encontraban aquí y allá: de cómo la señora Tijereta estaba haciendo la colada en casa y uno de sus hijos se cayó en el caldero, por eso corría tan

deprisa en busca del médico. Tom sentía un profundo desprecio por esas tonterías de Maggie y aplastaba la tijereta inmediatamente, una manera, superflua pero fácil de demostrar la falsedad de la historia; Lucy no podía evitar la idea de que tenían algo de cierto y, en cualquier caso, le parecían fantasías muy bonitas. De modo que el deseo de conocer la historia de un sapo muy corpulento, sumada a su carácter afectuoso, hizo que corriera hacia Maggie.

—¡Maggie! ¡Hay un sapo grande y muy divertido! Ven a verlo.

Maggie no dijo nada y se alejó de ella con el ceño fruncido. Mientras Tom, pareciera preferir a Lucy, ésta formaría parte de su crueldad. No hacía mucho que Maggie creía que nunca se mostraría desagradable con la pequeña y linda Lucy, del mismo modo que no podría ser cruel con una ratita blanca; pero entonces Tom era indiferente a Lucy y era Maggie quien la mimaba y le hacía caso. Ahora, en cambio, pensaba que le gustaría hacer llorar a Lucy dándole una bofetada o un pellizco, especialmente si así molestaba a Tom, al que sería inútil abofetear —suponiendo que se atreviera—, porque no le importaba. Maggie estaba segura de que si Lucy no hubiera estado allí, Tom no habría tardado en hacer las paces con ella.

Es fácil cansarse de hacer cosquillas a un sapo poco sensible, y al poco rato Tom empezó a mirar a su alrededor en busca de otra manera de pasar el rato. Sin embargo, en un jardín tan cuidado donde no les estaba permitido salir de los senderos empedrados, no había gran elección. El único gran placer que permitía semejante restricción era, precisamente, soslayarla, y Tom empezó a pensar en una visita insurgente al estanque situado tras unos campos.

—Oye, Lucy —dijo, moviendo la cabeza con aire misterioso mientras recogía la cuerda—. ¿Sabes lo que quiero hacer?

—¿Qué quieres hacer, Tom? —preguntó Lucy con curiosidad.

—Quiero ir al estanque y mirar el lucio. Puedes venir conmigo si quieres —ofreció el joven sultán.

—¡Oh, Tom! ¿Vas a atreverte? —exclamó Lucy—. La tía dijo que no debíamos salir del jardín.

—Bueno, saldré por el otro extremo del jardín —dijo Tom—. Nadie nos verá. Además, no me importa si me ven: me iré corriendo a casa.

—Pero yo no puedo correr —dijo Lucy, que nunca se había visto ante tentación semejante.

—No importa, contigo no se enfadarán —dijo Tom—. Podrás decir que te llevé yo.

Tom se alejó y Lucy trotó a su lado tímidamente, disfrutando del raro placer de hacer una travesura y entusiasmada también por la mención de aquel ser célebre, el lucio, aunque no sabía exactamente si eso era un pez o un ave. Maggie los vio salir del jardín y no pudo resistir el impulso de seguirlos. La ira y los celos, al igual que el amor, no pueden soportar perder de vista el objeto de su pasión, y que Tom y Lucy hicieran o vieran algo que ella ignorara era una idea intolerable para Maggie. De manera que se mantuvo a unas yardas de distancia sin que Tom la viera, absorto como estaba en la búsqueda del señor lucio —un monstruo sumamente interesante —, del que se decía que era muy viejo, muy grande y que tenía un apetito voraz. El lucio, como otros famosos personajes, no se mostraba cuando lo buscaban, pero Tom advirtió un movimiento rápido en el agua que lo atrajo hacia otro lugar de la orilla del estanque.

—¡Aquí, Lucy! —exclamó en un susurro—. ¡Ven aquí! ¡Cuidado! Quédate en la hierba, no pises donde han estado las vacas —añadió, señalando una península de hierba seca rodeada de barro pisoteado; el pésimo concepto que tenía de las chicas incluía la incapacidad total de caminar por lugares sucios.

Lucy se acercó con cuidado, siguiendo las instrucciones, y se inclinó para mirar lo que parecía una cabeza de flecha dorada corriendo por el estanque. Era una culebra de agua, le dijo Tom, y Lucy por fin pudo ver la onda de su cuerpo y se maravilló ante la posibilidad de que las serpientes supieran nadar. Maggie se había ido acercando cada vez más: ella también tenía que verlo, aunque le dolía mucho que a Tom no le importara que lo viera o no. Al final se encontró junto a Lucy, y Tom, que había advertido en silencio su aproximación, dio media vuelta.

—Vete, Maggie —dijo—. No cabes en este trozo de hierba. Nadie te ha pedido que vinieras.

En aquel momento, en Maggie se debatían pasiones suficientes para una tragedia, si las tragedias se hicieran solamente con pasiones; pero el aspecto

«de cierta magnitu».[6] presente en la pasión exigía acción; lo máximo que podía hacer Maggie, con un brusco movimiento de su bracito moreno, era empujar a la pobrecita Lucy, toda de rosa y blanco, al barro pisado por las vacas.

Tom no pudo contenerse y propinó a Maggie dos manotazos en el brazo mientras corría a sujetar a Lucy que lloraba desconsoladamente en el suelo. Maggie retrocedió hacia las raíces de un árbol, situado a varias yardas de distancia, y los contempló impenitente. Por lo general, se arrepentía en cuanto cometía alguna hazaña impetuosa, pero en esta ocasión Tom y Lucy habían hecho que se sintiera tan mal que se alegraba de haber estropeado su felicidad, de conseguir que todo el mundo se fastidiara. ¿Por qué iba a sentirlo? Tom tardaba demasiado en perdonarla, por mucho que ella hubiera podido arrepentirse.

—Se lo diré a nuestra madre, ¿sabes, señorita? —dijo Tom con voz alta y enfática en cuanto Lucy estuvo de pie, dispuesta a caminar.

Tom no acostumbraba a «chivars», pero en este caso la justicia exigía que Maggie recibiera el mayor castigo, aunque Tom no había aprendido a formular sus pensamientos de modo abstracto, ya que nunca mencionaba la palabra «justici» y no tenía ni idea de que sus deseos de castigar pudieran recibir un nombre tan elegante. Lucy estaba demasiado absorta en la calamidad sobrevenida —se había estropeado su mejor vestido y se encontraba incómoda, tan sucia y mojada— para pensar en la causa, que para ella era totalmente misteriosa. Era incapaz de adivinar qué había hecho para que Maggie se enfadara con ella, pero advertía su conducta antipática y desagradable, de modo que no intercedió ante Tom para que no se «chivar» y se limitó a correr a su lado llorando lastimeramente mientras Maggie permanecía sentada en las raíces del árbol y los miraba alejarse con su pequeño rostro de Medusa.

—Sally —dijo Tom en cuanto llegaron a la puerta de la cocina y Sally los contempló muda de asombro, con un trozo de pan con mantequilla en la boca y un tenedor de tostar en la mano—. Sally, di a mi madre que Maggie ha empujado a Lucy y la ha hecho caer en el barro.

—¡Ay, madre! ¿Cómo *s*'han *acercao* tanto al barro? —preguntó Sally torciendo el gesto mientras se inclinaba para examinar el *corpus delicti*.

La imaginación de Tom no había sido lo bastante rápida y capaz para incluir esta pregunta entre las consecuencias posibles, pero en cuanto se la formularon previó el resultado y calibró que Maggie no sería considerada la única culpable del accidente. Se alejó en silencio de la puerta de la cocina, dejando a Sally el placer de adivinar, cosa que las mentes activas prefieren con mucho a los conocimientos dados.

Como bien sabes, lector, Sally no se demoró en presentar a Lucy en la puerta del salón, porque tener un ser tan sucio en Garum Firs suponía una carga excesiva para una sola persona.

—¡Cielo santo! —exclamó la tía Pullet tras proferir un grito inarticulado. ¡Déjala en la puerta, Sally! No se *t* 'ocurra meterla en el salón.

—Vaya, *s*'ha caído en el barro —dijo la señora Tulliver, levantándose para examinar el estado de unas ropas de las que se sentía responsable ante su hermana Deane.

—Señora, ha sido Maggie quien la empujó —dijo Sally—. Lo ha dicho el señorito Tom. Y tiene que haber sido en el estanque, porque sólo allí hay tanto barro.

—Eso es, Bessy. Lo que yo te decía —dijo la señora Pullet con un tono de tristeza profética—: nunca se sabe de qué serán capaces tus niños.

La señora Tulliver enmudeció, sintiéndose una madre desgraciadísima. Como siempre, pensó que la gente creería que había cometido alguna maldad para merecer aquellos problemas maternales, mientras la señora Pullet empezaba a dar a Sally órdenes complicadísimas sobre cómo debía proteger la casa de sufrir severos daños durante el proceso de eliminación de la porquería. Entre tanto, la cocinera debía traer el té y los niños traviesos tomarían el suyo ignominiosamente relegados a la cocina. La señora Tulliver, suponiendo que estarían cerca, salió a hablar con aquellos niños malos, pero sólo encontró a Tom tras buscarlo un buen rato, apoyado en la blanca empalizada del gallinero con aire indiferente, agitando su trozo de cuerda por el otro lado, para molestar a un pavo.

—Tom, niño malo, ¿dónde está tu hermana? —preguntó la señora Tulliver con voz consternada.

—No lo sé —contestó Tom. El deseo de que se hiciera justicia con Maggie había disminuido desde el momento en que advirtió con claridad

que difícilmente podría realizarse sin la injusticia de que le reprocharan también su conducta.

—¡Vamos! ¿Dónde la has dejado? —preguntó su madre mirando a su alrededor.

—Sentada bajo el árbol que está junto al estanque —dijo Tom simulando no prestar atención más que a la cuerda y al pavo.

—Ve a buscarla ahora mismo, chico malo. ¿Cómo se *t*'ha ocurrido ir al estanque y llevar a tu hermana hasta el barro? Ya sabes que si se le presenta la oportunidad de hacer alguna travesura, la hace.

La señora Tulliver tenía por costumbre vincular la mala conducta de Tom, de un modo u otro, a Maggie.

La idea de que Maggie estaba sola, sentada junto al estanque, despertó el temor habitual de la señora Tulliver y subió al montador para tranquilizarse con la visión de aquella niña fatídica mientras Tom caminaba, no muy deprisa, hacia ella.

—Si hay niños que se sientan atraídos por el agua, esos son los míos —dijo en voz alta, sin caer en la cuenta de que no había nadie que pudiera oírla—. Algún día se ahogarán. Me gustaría que el río estuviera más lejos.

Pero cuando no sólo no localizó a Maggie sino que vio regresar sólo a Tom del estanque, el miedo se apoderó de ella y corrió hacia él.

—Maggie no está por el estanque, madre —dijo Tom—. Se ha ido.

Puedes imaginar, lector, la búsqueda aterrorizada y las dificultades para convencer a la madre de Maggie de que no se encontraba ahogada en el estanque. La señora Pullet comentó que, si vivía, tal vez llegara a conocer peor final que ése, quién podía saberlo; y el señor Pullet, confuso y abrumado por el cariz revolucionario de las cosas —el retraso del té y las aves de corral alarmadas por aquel inusual ir y venir—, cogió una escarda y alcanzó con ella la llave para abrir el corral de las ocas, donde era probable que Maggie se hubiera escondido.

Al cabo de un rato, Tom lanzó la idea de que Maggie se había ido a casa (sin considerar necesario declarar que eso era lo que habría hecho él en circunstancias similares), y su madre se tranquilizó con esa posibilidad.

—Sophy, por el amor de Dios, haz que pongan el caballo en el coche y me lleven a casa, quizá la encontremos por el camino. Lucy no puede

caminar con esta ropa —dijo, contemplando a la víctima inocente, envuelta en un chal y sentada con los pies desnudos sobre el sofá.

La tía Pullet se mostró bien dispuesta a tomar medidas para recuperar cuanto antes la tranquilidad y el orden en su casa, y no transcurrió mucho rato antes de que la señora Tulliver se encontrara en el coche mirando inquieta hacia delante. La pregunta que más le abrumaba era: ¿qué diría su padre si Maggie se perdía?

Capítulo XI

Maggie intenta huir de su sombra

Como de costumbre, las intenciones de Maggie iban más allá de lo que Tom había imaginado. La decisión que tomó después de que Tom y Lucy se alejaran no era tan sencilla como regresar a casa. ¡No! Se escaparía y se iría a vivir con los gitanos y Tom no volvería a verla nunca más. Esta idea no era nueva para Maggie: le habían dicho tantas veces que parecía una gitana y que, además, era «medio salvaj», que cuando estaba triste le parecía que la única manera de escapar al oprobio y sentirse en armonía con las circunstancias era viviendo bajo una carpa de color pardo en los terrenos comunales del municipio: creía que los gitanos la recibirían encantados y le tendrían mucho respeto por sus conocimientos superiores. En una ocasión mencionó esta idea ante Tom y le sugirió que se tiñera la cara de oscuro para huir juntos, pero Tom rechazó el proyecto con desprecio y le contestó que los gitanos eran ladrones, apenas tenían para comer y sólo poseían algún burro para desplazarse. Sin embargo, aquel día Maggie pensó que su infelicidad había alcanzado tal punto que los gitanos constituían su último refugio, y se levantó de las raíces del árbol donde estaba sentada con la sensación de estar viviendo una crisis; correría hasta llegar al terreno comunal de Dunlow, donde sin duda encontraría gitanos, y así aquel Tom tan cruel y el resto de parientes que tantos defectos le encontraban no tendrían que verla nunca más. Mientras corría pensó en su padre, pero se reconcilió con la idea de separarse de él decidiendo que le enviaría en secreto una carta mediante algún gitanillo que se escaparía corriendo sin

decirle dónde estaba y se limitaría a comunicarle que se encontraba bien, era feliz y lo quería mucho.

La carrera pronto la dejó sin aliento, pero cuando Tom regresó al estanque, Maggie se encontraba tres largos campos más allá, al borde de un camino que llevaba a la carretera principal. Se detuvo para recuperar el aliento y se le ocurrió pensar que aquello de huir no era muy agradable, por lo menos, antes de llegar al terreno donde se encontraban los gitanos, pero su decisión no flaqueó: cruzó la puerta de la verja y entró en el camino sin saber adónde conducía, porque nunca había pasado por allí cuando viajaban del molino de Dorlcote a Garum Firs, y se sintió más segura al pensar que así no sería posible que la alcanzaran. Pronto advirtió, no sin temor, que se acercaban dos hombres por el camino que se extendía ante ella: demasiado ocupada con la idea de que los conocidos fueran tras ella, no se le había ocurrido la posibilidad de encontrarse con desconocidos. Eran dos impresionantes individuos de aspecto andrajoso y rostro coloradote; uno de ellos llevaba un hatillo colgado de un palo sobre el hombro: pero para su sorpresa, aunque Maggie temía que la censuraran por huir, el portador del hatillo se detuvo y con un tono entre implorante y zalamero le preguntó si tenía alguna moneda para dar a un pobre hombre. Maggie llevaba una moneda de seis peniques en el bolsito —regalo del tío Glegg— y se la tendió al mendigo con una sonrisa educada, esperando que apreciara su generosidad.

—Esto es todo lo que tengo —dijo, excusándose.

—Gracias, señorita —contestó el hombre, con tono menos respetuoso y agradecido de lo que Maggie esperaba, e incluso observó que sonreía y guiñaba el ojo a su compañero. Maggie se alejó caminando muy deprisa, pero advirtió que los dos caminantes se quedaban inmóviles, probablemente para mirarla, y los oyó reír con sonoras carcajadas. De repente, se le ocurrió pensar que la habrían tomado por una niña boba: Tom le había dicho que el cabello corto le hacía parecer la tonta del pueblo y aquella idea era demasiado dolorosa para olvidarla rápidamente. Además, no llevaba manga larga, sólo una capa y una capota. No era probable que causara una impresión favorable a los caminantes y pensó en regresar a los campos, pero no al mismo costado del sendero, no fuera a encontrarse todavía en las

propiedades del tío Pullet. Entró por la primera puerta de un cercado que vio abierta y, tras aquel humillante encuentro, sintió una deliciosa sensación de intimidad al avanzar entre los setos. Estaba acostumbrada a vagar sola por los campos y allí se sentía menos asustada que en la carretera. En alguna ocasión tuvo que trepar para cruzar altas puertas cerradas, pero aquel era un mal menor; se alejaba muy deprisa y probablemente pronto llegaría a ver las tierras comunales de Dunlow u otras cualesquiera, porque había oído decir a su padre que no se podía ir muy lejos sin llegar a alguna. Eso esperaba, porque se sentía cada vez más cansada y hambrienta, y hasta que encontrara a los gitanos no tenía perspectiva alguna de tomar pan con mantequilla. Era todavía pleno día, pues la tía Pullet, que conservaba las costumbres tempranas de la familia Dodson, tomaba el té a las cuatro y media, según la hora solar, y a las cinco, según el reloj de la cocina; así pues, aunque hacía casi una hora que Maggie se había puesto en camino, todavía no se cernía sobre los campos penumbra alguna que le recordara la llegada de la noche. No obstante, tenía la sensación de haber caminado una gran distancia y le parecía sorprendente que no apareciera ante sus ojos el terreno comunal. Hasta el momento, había recorrido la rica parroquia de Garum, que poseía grandes extensiones de pastos, y sólo había visto a un campesino a lo lejos: eso, en cierto modo, era una suerte, pues los braceros podían ser demasiado ignorantes para entender sus motivos para ir al terreno comunal de Dunlow; de todos modos, habría sido mejor encontrar a alguien que le indicara el camino sin por ello preguntarle nada sobre sus asuntos. Por fin terminaron los campos verdes y Maggie se encontró mirando entre los barrotes de una puerta que daba a un camino con un alto margen de hierba a ambos lados. Nunca había visto una carretera tan ancha y, sin saber por qué, le dio la impresión de que el terreno comunal no podría estar muy lejos; tal vez fuera porque había visto un burro con un tronco atado a las patas para impedirle la huida comiendo del herboso margen, y en otra ocasión, cuando cruzó los terrenos comunales de Dunlow en la calesa de su padre, también vio un burro con aquel triste estorbo. Se coló entre los barrotes de la puerta y siguió caminando animada, aunque la asustaban las imágenes recurrentes de Apolión[7], de algún salteador de caminos armado, de un enano vestido de amarillo con una boca de oreja a oreja y de otros

peligros diversos, ya que la pobrecita Maggie poseía a un tiempo la timidez de una imaginación activa y la osadía de un impulso imperioso. Se había lanzado a la aventura de buscar a sus desconocidos semejantes, los gitanos, y ahora se encontraba en aquel camino extraño en el que apenas se atrevía a mirar a uno y otro lado, no fuera a ver al diabólico herrero de delantal de cuero sonriendo con los brazos en jarras. Y, con sobresalto, reparó en unas piernecitas desnudas que sobresalían, con los pies por delante, junto a una loma; demasiado alterada para distinguir a primera vista los andrajos y la oscura cabeza greñuda que acompañaban a las piernas, aquello le pareció algo horriblemente sobrenatural: algo así como un hongo diabólico. Era un muchacho dormido y Maggie se alejó corriendo, no fuera a despertarlo: no se le ocurrió que acaso fuera uno de sus amigos gitanos y que, de confirmarse tendría unos modales muy amistosos. Sin embargo, así era, porque al siguiente recodo del camino, Maggie distinguió la pequeña tienda semicircular; el humo azulado ascendía ante lo que iba a ser su refugio de todo el vilipendio que la había acosado en la vida civilizada. Incluso vio, junto a la columna de humo, una alta figura femenina: sin duda, la madre gitana, que se encargaba de suministrar el té y otros alimentos. Le asombró no sentir mayor alegría. Le sorprendía encontrar a los gitanos junto al camino y no en un terreno comunal: lo cierto era que resultaba decepcionante, porque el mismo terreno comunal misterioso e ilimitado, con zonas de arena donde esconderse, lejos del alcance de cualquiera, siempre había formado parte de la imagen que Maggie tenía de la vida de los gitanos. No obstante, siguió avanzando y pensó con cierto consuelo que probablemente los gitanos no sabían nada de los tontos de pueblo, de modo que no había peligro de que cayeran en el error de clasificarla de entrada como uno de ellos. Resultaba evidente que había atraído su atención, porque la figura alta, que resultó ser una mujer joven con una criatura en brazos, se dirigió lentamente a su encuentro. Maggie contempló aquel rostro mientras se le acercaba y se tranquilizó al pensar que su tía Pullet y los demás tenían razón cuando la llamaban gitana, porque aquel rostro de brillantes ojos negros y cabello largo se parecía bastante a la imagen que ella había observado en el espejo antes de cortarse el pelo.

—¿Adónde va *usté*, señorita? —preguntó la gitana con tono zalamero.

A Maggie aquello le encantó porque era exactamente lo que esperaba: los gitanos se habían dado cuenta al instante de que era una señorita y estaban dispuestos a tratarla del modo adecuado.

—Aquí mismo —dijo Maggie, con la sensación de que decía lo que había ensayado en un sueño—. Vengo a quedarme con vosotros si me dejáis.

—¡Qué gracia! Venga, pues. Vaya, qué señorita más linda —dijo la gitana, tomándola de la mano. A Maggie le pareció una mujer muy agradable, aunque le habría gustado que no estuviera tan sucia.

Se acercaron a la hoguera, en torno a la cual había un grupo reunido. Una vieja gitana, sentada en el suelo, se frotaba las rodillas y, de vez en cuando, metía un pincho en una olla de la que salía un vapor oloroso: dos niños greñudos, tendidos boca bajo, se apoyaban en los codos como dos pequeñas esfinges, y un plácido burro inclinaba la cabeza sobre una chica que, tendida de espaldas, le rascaba la nariz y lo obsequiaba con un poco de excelente heno robado. El sol poniente los iluminaba y la escena resultaba hermosa y agradable, pensó Maggie, aunque deseaba que no tardaran mucho en sacar las tazas del té. Todo sería encantador cuando hubiera enseñado a los gitanos a lavarse con una jofaina y a sentir interés por los libros. De todos modos, le desconcertó que la mujer joven empezara a hablar con la vieja en una lengua que Maggie no entendía mientras la chica alta que daba de comer al burro se incorporaba y la escrutaba sin saludarla.

—Cómo es eso, linda damita —dijo finalmente la anciana—: ¿Ha venido a quedarse con nosotros? *Asiéntese* y cuéntenos de *ande* viene.

Aquello parecía un cuento: a Maggie le gustaba que la llamaran linda damita y la trataran de aquella manera.

—Vengo de mi casa porque allí soy desgraciada y quiero ser gitana —explicó después de sentarse—. Viviré con vosotros, si queréis, y puedo enseñaros muchas cosas.

—Qué damita tan lista —exclamó la mujer del nene, sentándose al lado de Maggie y depositando el niño en el suelo para que gateara—. Y qué sombrerito y qué vestido tan bonitos —añadió mientras le quitaba la capota a Maggie y la examinaba, tras lo cual comentó algo a la vieja en aquel lenguaje desconocido. La chica alta le arrebató la capota y se la puso con

una gran sonrisa burlona, pero Maggie estaba decidida a no dar muestras de debilidad alguna en ese aspecto, como si el sombrero le importara algo.

—No quiero llevar sombrero —dijo Maggie—. Prefiero un pañuelo rojo, como vosotras —añadió, mirando a la amiga que tenía al lado—. Hasta ayer tenía el pelo bastante largo, pero me lo corté. Aunque me parece que me crecerá enseguida —añadió con aire de disculpa, pensando que tal vez las gitanas tenían especial preferencia por el cabello largo. En aquel momento, el deseo de caer en gracia a los gitanos había hecho que Maggie hubiera olvidado incluso el hambre que tenía.

—Oh, qué damita tan encantadora. Y, seguramente, tan rica —dijo la anciana—. ¿Vive en una casa bonita?

—Sí, mi casa es linda y me gusta mucho el río donde vamos a pescar, pero muchas veces soy muy desgraciada. *M'*habría gustado traerme libros, pero me he escapado a toda prisa ¿sabes? Pero puedo contaros casi todo lo que sale en mis libros, porque los he leído muchas veces, y eso os divertirá. Y también puedo contaros cosas de geografía, que son cosas sobre el mundo en que vivimos, que son muy útiles e interesantes. ¿Habéis oído hablar de Colón?

Los ojos de Maggie empezaban a brillar y sus mejillas se ruborizaban: estaba comenzando a instruir a los gitanos y a tener influencia sobre ellos. Los gitanos la escuchaban asombrados, aunque su atención se dividía entre la niña y el contenido de su bolsito, que la amiga situada a la derecha le había vaciado sin que ella se diera cuenta.

—¿Es allí *ande* vive usted, señorita? —preguntó la anciana cuando mencionó a Colón.

—¡Oh, no! —exclamó Maggie con cierta pena—. Colón fue un hombre muy importante que encontró medio mundo, lo encadenaron y lo trataron muy mal. Lo pone en mi catecismo de geografía, pero a lo mejor es una historia demasiado larga para contarla antes del té… Quiero merendar.

A Maggie se le escaparon estas palabras a pesar de su voluntad y así pasó del tono didáctico y condescendiente al mero mal humor infantil.

—Vaya, la pobre damita tiene hambre —comentó la mujer joven—. *Darle* algo frío para comer. Seguramente habrá *caminao* mucho, querida niña. ¿Dónde está su casa?

—Es el molino de Dorlcote, está muy lejos —dijo Maggie—. Mi padre es el señor Tulliver, pero no debemos decirle dónde estoy porque me llevaría a casa de nuevo. ¿Dónde vive la reina de las gitanas?

—¡Vaya! ¿Quiere verla? —preguntó la mujer joven. La niña alta, entre tanto, no dejaba de escrutar a Maggie y de sonreír con una mueca. Sin duda, sus modales no eran nada agradables.

—No —contestó Maggie—. Sólo pensaba que si no es una buena reina, os alegraríais si muriera y pudierais escoger a otra. Si yo fuera reina, sería muy buena y amable con todos.

—Aquí *tie* un poco de buena comida —dijo la vieja, tendiéndole a Maggie un trozo de pan, que había sacado de una bolsa con mendrugos y un poco de tocino frío.

—Gracias —dijo Maggie, mirando la comida, pero sin tomarla—, pero ¿no podrías darme un poco de pan con mantequilla y un poco de té, en lugar de esto? No me gusta el tocino.

—No tenemos té ni mantequilla —contestó la vieja frunciendo un poco el ceño, como si estuviera cansándose de contemplaciones.

—Bueno, pues me servirá un poco de pan con melaza dijo Maggie.

—No tenemos melaza —contestó la vieja enfadada, tras lo cual tuvo lugar un brusco diálogo en aquella lengua desconocida y una de las pequeñas esfinges le arrebató el pan con tocino y empezó a comérselo. En aquel momento, la chica alta, que se había alejado unos metros, regresó y dijo algo que causó gran conmoción. La vieja pareció olvidar el hambre de Maggie, introdujo el pincho en la olla y lo agitó con energía; la mujer joven entró en la tienda y sacó platos y cucharas. Maggie tembló un poco y temió que los ojos se le llenaran de lágrimas. Entretanto, la chica alta soltó un grito agudo y corrió hacia el muchacho junto al que había pasado Maggie cuando dormía: un tosco pilluelo de la edad de Tom, el cual miró fijamente a Maggie y a continuación prosiguió con su charla incomprensible. Maggie se encontraba muy sola y estaba segura de que no tardaría en echarse a llorar: los gitanos no parecían ocuparse de ella y se sentía muy débil en su compañía. Pero un nuevo terror contuvo sus lágrimas: cuando aparecieron los dos hombres cuya aproximación había sido la causa del súbito revuelo. El mayor de los dos dejó caer la bolsa que llevaba y se dirigió a las mujeres

con gritos de reprimenda que ellas contestaron con una retahíla en tono agudo e insolente; mientras tanto, un chucho negro corrió hacia Maggie ladrando, lo que sumió a la niña en unos temblores que encontraron nueva causa en las maldiciones con que el hombre más joven llamó al perro y en el golpe que le propinó con el gran bastón que llevaba en la mano.

Maggie pensó que era imposible que fuera nunca reina de esa gente o que llegara siquiera a comunicarles conocimientos útiles y divertidos. Los hombres parecían estar haciendo preguntas sobre Maggie, porque la miraban y la conversación fue adoptando el tono pacífico que implica curiosidad por un lado y capacidad de satisfacerla por otro.

—Esta preciosa damita ha *venío*a vivir con nosotros, ¿no os alegráis? —dijo finalmente la mujer joven en el tono zalamero empleado antes.

—Ajá, *m*'alegro mucho —contestó el hombre joven, que examinaba el dedal de plata de Maggie y otras cosillas que le habían cogido del bolsito.

Las devolvió todas, excepto el dedal, a la mujer joven con un comentario y ésta volvió a guardarlas inmediatamente en el bolsito de Maggie, mientras los hombres se sentaban y empezaban a atacar el contenido de la olla —un estofado de carne con patatas— que habían sacado del fuego y habían servido en una fuente amarilla.

Maggie empezó a pensar que tal vez Tom tuviera razón sobre los gitanos: sin duda, eran ladrones, a menos que el hombre tuviera intención de devolverle de inmediato el dedal. Se lo habría regalado gustosa porque no sentía por él especial cariño; pero la idea de que se encontraba entre ladrones le impedía sentir ningún consuelo en las nuevas atenciones que recibía: todos los ladrones eran malos, con la única excepción de Robin Hood. Las mujeres se dieron cuenta de que estaba asustada.

—No tenemos *na* bueno *pa* que coma la señorita —dijo la vieja con tono meloso—. Y *tie* tanta hambre, la pobre damita.

—Tome, cariño, mire si le gusta esto —dijo la mujer joven, tendiéndole un poco de estofado en un plato marrón con una cuchara de hierro; Maggie, recordando el enfado de la vieja porque no le había gustado el pan con tocino, no se atrevió a rechazar el guiso, aunque el miedo le había quitado el apetito. ¡Ojalá su padre apareciera por allí con la calesa y se la llevara! ¡O pasaran por ahí Jack el Matagigantes o el señor Greatheart[8], o San

Jorge, el que mataba al dragón en las monedas de medio penique! Maggie pensó, abatida, que nunca se había visto a aquellos héroes en las proximidades de Saint Ogg's: allí nunca pasaba nada extraordinario.

Como se ha podido apreciar, Maggie Tulliver estaba muy lejos de poseer la educación y formación que tiene actualmente una niña de ocho o nueve años: sólo había asistido un año a la escuela de Saint Ogg's, y tenía tan pocos libros que algunas veces incluso leía el diccionario; de manera que, si fuera posible recorrer su mente, se distinguiría la más sorprendente ignorancia junto con el conocimiento más insospechado. Era capaz de explicar que existía una palabra tal como «poligami» y, puesto que conocía también el término «polisílab», había deducido que «pol» significaba «mucho»; pero no tenía la menor idea de que los gitanos no poseyeran una gran despensa, y sus pensamientos, por lo general, estaban formados por una extraña mezcla de perspicacia clarividente y ciegos sueños.

En los últimos cinco minutos, sus ideas sobre los gitanos habían sufrido una rápida modificación. Tras considerarlos compañeros muy respetables y bien dispuestos a la instrucción, había empezado a pensar que tal vez quisieran matarla en cuanto se hiciera de noche y, más tarde, trocear su cuerpo para ir guisándolo poco a poco: incluso sospechó que el viejo de ojos feroces era, en realidad, el demonio y podía despojarse en cualquier momento de ese disfraz y convertirse en el herrero de la gran sonrisa o en un monstruo de ojos fieros con alas de dragón. No conseguía comerse el guiso y, sin embargo, lo que más temía era ofender a los gitanos revelando la opinión extremadamente desfavorable que acababa de formarse sobre ellos; se preguntaba con un fervoroso interés que ningún teólogo podría haber superado si, en caso de que el demonio estuviera presente, podría leerle el pensamiento.

—¡Cómo! ¿No le gusta cómo huele, querida? —preguntó la mujer joven, observando que Maggie ni siquiera había comido una cucharada—. Anda, pruébelo.

—No, gracias —dijo Maggie, haciendo acopio de todas sus fuerzas para sonreír amistosamente—. Me parece que no tengo tiempo, está haciéndose de noche. Me parece que tengo que irme a casa. Ya volveré otro día y os traeré una cesta con tartas de mermelada y otras cosas.

Maggie se levantó mientras anunciaba aquel plan ilusorio, deseando fervientemente que Apolión fuera crédulo; pero sus esperanzas naufragaron cuando la vieja gitana dijo:

—Pare un poco, pare un poco, damita: la llevaremos a su casa, sana y salva, después de cenar: irá montada, como corresponde a una dama.

Maggie se sentó de nuevo con escasa fe en esa promesa, aunque vio cómo la chica alta embridaba el burro y le echaba encima unas alforjas.

—Andando, señorita —dijo el hombre joven, poniéndose en pie y conduciendo el burro—. ¿*Ande* vive? ¿Cómo se llama ese sitio?

—Vivo en el molino de Dorlcote —se apresuró a contestar Maggie—. Mi padre es el señor Tulliver, allí vive.

—Caramba, ¿un molino grande un poco para acá de Saint Ogg's?

—Sí —dijo Maggie—. ¿Está muy lejos? Me parece que me gustaría irme andando, si le parece bien.

—No, no. Empieza a oscurecer y debemos darnos prisa. Y el burro la llevará *mu* bien, ya verá.

Alzó a Maggie mientras hablaba y la sentó sobre el borrico. La niña sintió alivio al ver que no era el viejo quien se disponía a acompañarla, pero apenas se atrevía a esperar que, efectivamente, la llevara a su casa.

—Aquí está su bonito sombrero —dijo la mujer joven, colocándole la prenda antes despreciada y ahora recibida con alegría—. Y les dirá que nos hemos *portao* muy bien con usted, ¿verdad? Y que hemos dicho que era una damita preciosa.

—Oh, sí. Muchas gracias. Os estoy muy agradecida. Pero me gustaría que tú también vinieras conmigo —dijo Maggie, pensando que cualquier cosa sería mejor que partir sola con uno de aquellos hombres tan terribles: sería más alegre que la asesinara un grupo numeroso.

—Ah, yo le gusto más, ¿verdad? —dijo la mujer—. Pero no puedo ir, irán demasiado aprisa para mí.

Al parecer, el hombre tenía intención de montar en el borrico y sostener a Maggie ante él, y la niña fue tan incapaz de protestar contra esta solución como el propio burro, aunque aquello le pareciera peor que cualquier pesadilla. Después de que la mujer se despidiera de ella con unas palmaditas en la espalda, el burro, siguiendo la enérgica indicación del

bastón del hombre, se puso en marcha rápidamente por el camino en dirección hacia el lugar por donde había venido Maggie una hora atrás, mientras la chica alta y el tosco pilluelo, provistos también de palos, los escoltaron amablemente durante el primer centenar de yardas entre gritos y golpes.

Ni siquiera Leonora[9] en su sobrenatural viaje nocturno con el fantasma de su amado estaba más aterrorizada que la pobre Maggie en aquel recorrido perfectamente normal sobre un burro de paso corto, con un gitano a su espalda convencido de estar ganándose media corona. La luz rojiza del sol poniente parecía poseer un significado profético, relacionado sin duda con el alarmante rebuzno del otro borrico, atado al tronco. Las dos casitas con tejado de paja, las únicas que vieron junto al camino, hacían el paisaje aún más lúgubre; no tenían ventanas propiamente dichas y las puertas estaban cerradas: seguro que allí vivían brujas, y Maggie sintió alivio al ver que el burro no se detenía.

Por fin —¡qué hermosa visión!— aquel camino, el más largo del mundo, se terminó y desembocó en una carretera ancha por la que, en aquel momento, circulaba incluso un carruaje. Y en la esquina había una indicación: seguro que la había visto antes. La señal decía: «A Saint Ogg's, 2 milla». Así pues, el gitano de veras la llevaba a casa: después de todo, probablemente, era un buen hombre y quizá se había ofendido al pensar que no quería viajar sola con él. La idea fue ganando terreno a medida que Maggie se convencía de que el hombre conocía bien la carretera, y estaba pensando en cómo iniciar una conversación con el ofendido gitano y no sólo reparar sus sentimientos sino también borrar la impresión causada por su cobardía cuando llegaron a un cruce y Maggie divisó a alguien que se acercaba montado en un caballo de cara blanca.

—¡Para, para! —gritó—. ¡Es mi padre! ¡Padre, padre!

Aquella alegría repentina resultó casi dolorosa y, antes de que su padre llegara hasta ella, se echó a llorar. El señor Tulliver se asombró muchísimo, porque regresaba de Basset y todavía no había pasado por su casa.

—¡Caramba! ¿Qué significa esto? —dijo, frenando el caballo mientras Maggie se deslizaba del burro y corría hacia el estribo de su padre.

—Me parece que la señorita *s'* ha perdío —dijo el gitano—. Llegó hasta nuestro campamento, en el camino de Dunlow. Ahora la llevaba hacia donde nos ha dicho que vivía. Cae muy lejos, cuando uno se ha *pasao* todo el día por ahí.

—Oh, sí, padre. Ha sido muy bueno al traerme a casa —dijo Maggie—. ¡Es un hombre amable y bueno!

—Tenga, buen hombre —dijo el señor Tulliver, tendiéndole cinco chelines—. Es la mejor acción que ha hecho nunca. No soportaría perder a esta mocita. Venga, sube aquí delante.

Se pusieron en marcha y Maggie apoyó la cabeza en su padre y siguió llorando.

—¡Vaya! ¡Maggie, qué es eso, qué es eso! ¿Cómo ha sido que has estado vagando por ahí y *t'* has perdido?

—Padre —sollozó Maggie—. Me he escapado porque era muy desgraciada. Tom se ha enfadado mucho conmigo y no lo podía soportar.

—Ea, ea —dijo el señor Tulliver tranquilizándola—. Ni se *t'*ocurra escaparte de tu padre, ¿qué haría tu padre sin su mocita?

—No, no. Nunca volveré a escaparme, nunca.

Cuando llegaron a casa aquella noche, el señor Tulliver habló con claridad con la señora Tulliver y con Tom, lo que tuvo el sorprendente resultado de que Maggie nunca oyó un reproche de su madre ni una broma de su hermano sobre la tonta escapada con los gitanos. Aquella reacción tan poco habitual atemorizó a Maggie y algunas veces interpretaba que su conducta había sido demasiado terrible para que se mencionara.

Capítulo XII

En casa del señor y la señora Glegg

Para ver a los señores Glegg en su casa, debemos adentrarnos en Saint Ogg's, esa venerable población de rojos tejados estriados y almacenes con amplios gabletes, donde los barcos negros depositan sus cargas del lejano Norte y se llevan, a cambio los preciosos productos del interior, el queso bien prensado y las finas lanas con los que, sin duda, mis selectos lectores se habrán familiarizado a través de la mejor literatura clásica pastoril.

Se trata de una de esas ciudades viejas, muy viejas, que producen la sensación de ser una prolongación de la naturaleza, al igual que los nidos de los tilonorrincos o pájaros pergoleros australianos o las laberínticas galerías de los termes: un pueblo que lleva consigo las huellas de su crecimiento y su historia, como un árbol milenario, y ha brotado y se ha desarrollado entre el río y la baja colina desde la época en que le daban la espalda las legiones romanas del campamento situado en la ladera, y los reyes del mar de largos cabellos remontaban el río y miraban con ojos ávidos y fieros la feracidad de las tierras. Es una población «familiarizada con los años olvidado»[10]. La sombra del rey héroe sajón todavía deambula vacilante, rememorando las escenas de su juventud y amoríos, y a su encuentro sale la sombra aún más melancólica del temible pagano danés, al que atravesó la espada de un vengador invisible cuando se hallaba entre sus guerreros, y en las tardes de otoño se alza de su túmulo situado en la colina como una neblina blanca que flota en el patio del viejo ayuntamiento situado junto al río, el lugar donde fue milagrosamente asesinado en los días previos a la construcción

del viejo edificio. Los normandos empezaron la construcción de aquel hermoso y viejo ayuntamiento que, como la ciudad, habla de los pensamientos y las manos de generaciones dispersas; pero es todo tan viejo que contemplamos con benevolencia sus incongruencias y nos alegramos de que quienes construyeron el mirador de piedra y quienes edificaron la fachada y las torres góticas con pequeños ladrillos y ornamentos trifoliados, así como las ventanas y almenas delimitadas en piedra, no cometieran el sacrilegio de demoler la vieja nave de entramado de madera, con su salón de banquetes con techo de roble.

Incluso más antiguo que este antiguo ayuntamiento tal vez sea el fragmento de muro inserto en el campanario de la iglesia parroquial, que, según dicen, es un resto de la capilla original dedicada a san Ogg, el santo patrón de esta antigua ciudad, de cuya historia poseo varias versiones manuscritas. Me inclino a favor de la más breve puesto que, si no fuera totalmente cierta, al menos contendría menos falsedades. «Ogg, hijo de Beor», dice mi hagiógrafo particular, «era un barquero que se ganaba apenas la vida cruzando pasajeros por el río Floss. Una noche muy ventosa vio a una mujer con un niño en brazos gimiendo a la orilla del río; iba vestida con andrajos y tenía aspecto agotado y abatido. Rogaba que la llevaran al otro lado del río, y los hombres que allí había le preguntaban: "¿Por qué quieres cruzar el río? Aguarda hasta la mañana y cobíjate aquí para pasar la noche, sé prudente y no cometas locuras". Pero ella seguía gimiendo e implorando. Entonces apareció Ogg, hijo de Beorl, y le dijo: "Yo te cruzaré al otro lado: basta con que tu corazón lo necesite", y así lo hizo. Y sucedió que en cuando la mujer puso un pie en la orilla, sus harapos se transformaron en un largo vestido blanco, su rostro adquirió una belleza extraordinaria y la envolvió un halo tan luminoso que proyectaba sobre el agua la luz de una luna llena. Y le dijo: "Ogg, hijo de Beorl, bendito seas porque no discutiste los deseos del corazón, sino que te compadeciste y me ayudaste. De ahora en adelante, aquel que entre en tu barca estará protegido de la tormenta, y cuando ésta se aventure a rescatar a alguien, salvará vidas de hombres y ganado". Y cuando llegaron las inundaciones, la bendición de la barca salvó a muchos. Pero cuando murió Ogg, hijo de Beorl, en el momento en que partió su alma, la barca se soltó de las amarras, se dejó

llevar por el reflujo de la marea rápidamente hacia el océano y nunca más volvieron a verla. A partir de entonces, siempre que había una inundación, al llegar el crepúsculo se veía a Ogg, hijo de Beorl, con su barca sobre las extensas aguas: en la proa se sentaba la Virgen, iluminando las aguas como la luna llena para que los remeros que se hallaban en penumbra pudieran redoblar sus fuerzas y seguir remand».

Como se ve, esta leyenda refleja la periodicidad de las inundaciones que, incluso cuando no se cobraban ninguna vida humana resultaban fatales para el ganado indefenso y causaban la muerte repentina de todos los seres vivos más pequeños. Sin embargo, la población conoció trastornos incluso peores que las inundaciones: guerras civiles cuando aquel era un continuo campo de batalla y los primeros puritanos agradecían a Dios la sangre de los legitimistas, y después los legitimistas daban gracias a Dios por la sangre de los puritanos. En aquellos tiempos, muchos ciudadanos honrados perdieron todas sus posesiones por cuestiones de conciencia y marcharon, empobrecidos, de su ciudad natal. Sin duda, todavía se alzan muchas de las casas que estos honrados ciudadanos tuvieron que abandonar apenados: pintorescas casas con gabletes situadas frente al río, comprimidas entre almacenes más recientes y atravesadas por sorprendentes pasajes con recodos y ángulos agudos que terminan por conducir a la fangosa orilla, continuamente inundada por la marea. Las casas de ladrillo tienen aspecto añejo y, en la época de la señora Glegg, ningún detalle moderno resultaba incongruente: no había escaparates con grandes lunas, ninguna fachada de estuco ni ningún otro intento falaz de simular que la vieja y roja población de Saint Ogg's había surgido la víspera. Los escaparates eran pequeños y sencillos porque las esposas e hijas de los granjeros, que iban a hacer la compra el día del mercado, no tenían la menor intención de adquirir nada en tiendas distintas de las habituales; y los comerciantes no ofrecían mercancías destinadas a clientes de paso que no volverían a ver. Ah, se diría que incluso la época de la señora Glegg queda muy lejana, separada de nosotros por unos cambios que parecen ensanchar los años. La guerra y el rumor de la guerra habían desaparecido de la mente de los hombres, y si alguna vez pensaban en ella los granjeros cubiertos con sobretodos de sayal que agitaban los sacos de muestra para vaciarlos y murmuraban en la

atestada plaza del mercado, era como un estado de cosas que pertenecía a una edad de oro pasada, cuando los precios eran altos. Sin duda, se habían ido para siempre los tiempos en que el ancho río podía traer barcos poco gratos: ahora Rusia no era más que el lugar de origen de la linaza —cuanta más llegara, mejor— destinada a las grandes piedras verticales de los molinos, cuyos brazos como guadañas rugían, gemían y barrían cuidadosamente como si tuvieran dentro un alma. Los católicos, las malas cosechas y las misteriosas fluctuaciones del comercio eran los tres males que debía temer la humanidad: ni siquiera las inundacion*es* habían sido grandes durante los últimos años. El espíritu de Saint Ogg's no se proyectaba demasiado hacia el futuro o hacia el pasado. Había heredado una larga historia a la que no prestaba atención y no tenía ojos para los espíritus que recorrían sus calles. Desde los siglos en que se había visto en las aguas crecidas a san Ogg y a la Virgen Madre en la proa, se habían dejado atrás muchos recuerdos que habían ido desvaneciéndose, de la misma manera que la cumbre de las colinas iba redondeándose. Y el presente era como una llanura donde los hombres hubieran dejado de creer en la existencia de volcanes y terremotos, convencidos de que el mañana sería idéntico al ayer y que dormían para siempre las fuerzas gigantescas que antes agitaban la tierra. Habían pasado ya los días en que la gente se forjaba, en gran medida, de acuerdo con su fe y de ningún modo podía cambiarla. Los católicos resultaban formidables porque habrían deseado apoderarse del gobierno y de las propiedades y quemar vivos a los hombres, pero no porque pudieran convencer a ningún parroquiano cuerdo y honrado de Saint Ogg's para que creyera en el Papa. Un anciano recordaba que cuando John Wesley predicaba en la plaza del mercado convenció a una tosca multitud, pero hacía ya mucho tiempo que no se esperaba que los predicadores conmovieran el alma de los hombres. El único síntoma de un celo inadecuado para aquellos tiempos más sobrios, cuando los hombres habían terminado ya con los cambios, era el ocasional estallido de fervor en los púlpitos discrepantes a propósito del bautismo infantil. El protestantismo se sentía cómodo, despreocupado de los cismas, indiferente al proselitismo: la discrepancia se heredaba, lo mismo que el emplazamiento del banco en la iglesia o las relaciones comerciales, y el

clero trataba despectivamente la discrepancia como una tonta costumbre propia de familias dedicadas al comercio de comestibles y a la fabricación de velas, si bien no resultaba incompatible con el próspero comercio al por mayor. Sin embargo, con la Cuestión Católica llegó un ligero viento de controversia que alteró la calma: el anciano párroco en algunas ocasiones se mostraba aficionado a la historia y al debate, y el señor Spray, el ministro de la Iglesia Independiente empezó a pronunciar sermones políticos en los que distinguía con gran sutileza entre su ferviente fe en el derecho de los católicos al voto y el convencimiento de que se condenarían para la eternidad. No obstante, la mayoría de los oyentes del señor Spray eran incapaces de seguir sus sutilezas y muchos discrepantes anticuados se apenaban de que «respaldara a los católico», mientras que otros pensaban que sería mejor que dejara en paz la política. En Saint Ogg's el espíritu público no se tenía en gran estima y los hombres que se ocupaban de cuestiones políticas eran considerados con cierto recelo como personajes peligrosos: por lo general, poseían escasos o inexistentes negocios y, de tenerlos, era probable que resultaran insolventes.

Así era el aspecto general de Saint Ogg's en los tiempos de la señora Glegg, en el momento concreto de la historia de su familia en que tuvo lugar la pelea con el señor Tulliver. En aquella época, la ignorancia era mucho más cómoda que ahora, y se acogía con todos los honores en la mejor sociedad sin que fuera necesario disfrazarla con complicados trajes de conocimientos; una época en la que los periódicos baratos no existían y a los médicos rurales ni se les ocurría preguntar a sus pacientes femeninas si les gustaba leer, sino que daban por hecho que preferían chismorrear: unos tiempos en que las damas con ricos trajes de seda llevaban grandes bolsos en los que guardaban un hueso de oveja para protegerse de los calambres. La señora Glegg llevaba un hueso de esos, que había heredado de su abuela, junto con un traje de brocado que podía sostenerse solo, como si fuera una armadura, y un bastón con empuñadura de plata, ya que la familia Dodson era respetable desde hacía muchas generaciones.

La señora Glegg tenía un salón delantero y otro trasero en su excelente casa de Saint Ogg's, de manera que contaba con dos puntos de vista desde los que observar las debilidades de sus congéneres y sentirse así más

agradecida por su excepcional fortaleza de carácter. Desde las ventanas que daban a la calle, divisaba el camino que salía de Saint Ogg's en dirección a la carretera de Tofton, y advertía la tendencia creciente «a callejea» de las mujeres cuyos maridos no se habían retirado de los negocios, así como la costumbre de llevar medias de algodón tejido, lo que abría una perspectiva temible para la generación siguiente. Desde las ventanas traseras veía el agradable jardín y el huerto que se extendía hasta el río, y observaba el absurdo empeño del señor Glegg en pasar las horas entre «flores y hortaliza». El señor Glegg, tras abandonar la actividad de tratante en lanas con el propósito de disfrutar del resto de sus días, había encontrado que esta última ocupación resultaba mucho más penosa que su negocio, de modo que se aficionó a trabajar la tierra como distracción y acostumbraba a relajarse haciendo el jornal de dos jardineros normales. El ahorro del sueldo de un jardinero tal vez habría empujado a la señora Glegg a hacer la vista gorda ante esa tontería, si es que era posible que una mujer sensata llegara a simular respeto por las aficiones de su marido. Pero es bien sabido que esta excesiva complacencia conyugal sólo es propia del sector más débil de este sexo, apenas sensible a la responsabilidad de una esposa como freno a las debilidades de su esposo, que casi nunca son de carácter racional o encomiable.

Por su parte, el señor Glegg tenía una doble fuente de ocupación mental que prometía ser inagotable. Por un lado, se sorprendía con sus descubrimientos de historia natural y encontraba que el terreno de su jardín contenía maravillosas orugas, babosas e insectos que, por lo que sabía, nunca habían sido objeto de observación humana, y advertía coincidencias notables entre estos fenómenos zoológicos y los grandes acontecimientos de la época: por ejemplo, antes de que ardiera la catedral de York aparecieron misteriosas señales serpenteantes en las hojas de los rosales, así como una inusual abundancia de babosas cuyo origen le intrigó hasta que, de repente, se le ocurrió establecer un vínculo con la triste conflagración. (El señor Glegg tenía una actividad mental inusual que, en cuanto se retiró del negocio de la lana, se encaminó de modo natural en otras direcciones). Y el segundo tema de meditación consistía en lo «contrarios» que era la mente femenina, de la que la señora Glegg constituía un ejemplo típico. El que una

criatura hecha —desde el punto de vista genealógico— a partir de la costilla del varón y, en ese caso concreto, mantenida en la mayor respetabilidad sin la menor inquietud por su parte, se encontrara habitualmente en un estado de contradicción con las propuestas más anodinas e incluso con las concesiones más complacientes, constituía un misterio en el orden del universo cuya respuesta había buscado en vano en los primeros capítulos del Génesis. El señor Glegg había escogido a la mayor de las señoritas Dodson en tanto que hermosa encarnación de la prudencia y el ahorro femeninos, y puesto que él era partidario de conseguir y guardar dinero, había previsto una gran armonía conyugal. Sin embargo, en aquella curiosa mezcla del carácter femenino, podía suceder con facilidad que el aroma fuera desagradable a pesar de la excelencia de los ingredientes; y una tacañería adecuada y sistemática puede ir acompañada de una salsa que estropee el disfrute. El propio señor Glegg era tacaño del modo más afable: sus vecinos lo llamaban «agarrad», lo que siempre significa que la persona en cuestión es un avaro amable. Cuando alguien expresaba cierta predilección por las cortezas del queso, el señor Glegg se acordaba de guardárselas, encantado de recrearle el paladar, y era propenso a tener animales de compañía que no requirieran cuidados. No había hipocresía ni engaño en el señor Glegg: habría llorado con sentimientos verdaderos al ver cómo una viuda se veía obligada a vender sus muebles, aunque un billete de cinco libras de su bolsillo pudiera impedir la venta: pero la donación de cinco libras a una persona humilde le habría parecido una loca forma de despilfarro más que de «carida», ya que siempre había concebido ésta como una serie de pequeñas ayudas, no como una neutralización de la desgracia. Y el señor Glegg era tan entusiasta de ahorrar el dinero propio como el ajeno: habría dado un gran rodeo para evitar un peaje, tuviera que pagarlo él u otra persona, y ponía cierto empeño en convencer a conocidos indiferentes para que adoptaran un sustituto barato del betún negro. Este hábito inalienable del ahorro como un fin en sí mismo era propio de los industriosos hombres de negocios de la generación anterior, que habían construido lentamente sus fortunas, casi como es natural en el lebrel seguir el rastro del zorro: y los había convertido en una «raz», casi perdida en estos días de dinero de fácil consecución, cuando el despilfarro sigue los

pasos a la necesidad. En esos tiempos pasados, la «independencia económic» apenas se conseguía nunca sin cierta tacañería, y esta cualidad se encontraba en todas las regiones combinada con caracteres tan diversos como los frutos de los que se puede extraer ácido. Los verdaderos harpagones eran siempre personajes notorios y excepcionales, pero no lo eran los respetables contribuyentes que, tras pasar apuros, conservaban, incluso cuando disfrutaban ya de un cómodo retiro, con el huerto y la bodega bien provistos, la costumbre de contemplar la vida como un ingenioso proceso de recorte de su sustento sin dejar por ello un déficit perceptible, y no les habría costado abandonar de inmediato un lujo gravado con un nuevo impuesto, tuvieran quinientas libras de renta anual o de capital. El señor Glegg era uno de estos hombres que tan difíciles resultaban para los ministros de hacienda; si tienes esto en cuenta, lector, te resultará más sencillo comprender por qué seguía convencido de que había hecho un buen matrimonio, a pesar del acre condimento que la naturaleza había dado a las virtudes de la mayor de las señoritas Dodson. El hombre de tendencia afectuosa que encuentra una esposa que coincide con su idea de la vida, se convence fácilmente de que ninguna otra mujer le habría convenido tanto y se pelea un poco a diario sin sentir por ello ningún distanciamiento. El señor Glegg, que poseía un carácter reflexivo y ya no estaba ocupado con las lanas, pasaba muchas horas meditando sobre las peculiaridades de la mente femenina tal como se mostraba ante él en su vida doméstica: y, con todo, pensaba que el modo que la señora Glegg tenía de dirigir la casa era un modelo para su sexo: le parecía una irregularidad lamentable que otras mujeres no enrollaran las servilletas con la misma tirantez y énfasis que la señora Glegg, que sus dulces no poseyeran la misma consistencia correosa y que sus conservas de ciruelas damascenas no tuvieran la misma venerable solidez: ¡ca!, incluso la peculiar combinación de olores a alimentos y productos de limpieza del armario de la señora Glegg le producía la impresión de ser el único olor correcto para un aparador. Y es probable que no echara de menos las discusiones si éstas hubieran dejado de producirse durante una semana; sin duda una esposa débil y aquiescente habría dejado sus meditaciones ayunas y desprovistas de misterio.

La inequívoca bondad del señor Glegg se manifestaba en que le dolía más ver a su esposa en desacuerdo con los demás —aunque fuera con Dolly, la criada— que discrepar él mismo con ella, y la pelea con el señor Tulliver le irritó tanto que, a la mañana siguiente, al contemplar el estado de las primeras coles durante el paseo que dio por el huerto antes del desayuno, apenas experimentó el placer que habría sentido en otras circunstancias. Sin embargo, se dirigió a desayunar con cierta esperanza de que ahora que la señora Glegg lo «había consultado con la almohad», su enfado se hubiera amortiguado lo bastante para ceder paso a su habitual sentido del decoro familiar. Presumía con frecuencia de que en la familia Dodson nunca se había producido una de esas peleas a muerte que habían destrozado otras familias: nunca se había desheredado a un Dodson ni se había repudiado a ningún primo, ¿por qué iba a hacerse? Todos los primos tenían dinero o, como mínimo, poseían varias casas.

La nube vespertina en forma de flequillo postizo no aparecía sobre la frente de la señora Glegg cuando se sentaba a la mesa del desayuno. Dado que pasaba la mañana ocupada en asuntos domésticos, habría sido un dispendio absurdo adornarse con algo tan superfluo para preparar dulces correosos. Hacia las diez y media, el decoro exigía flequillo, pero hasta entonces la señora Glegg podía ahorrárselo sin que la sociedad tuviera la menor noticia. Sin embargo, aquel día esa ausencia dejaba de manifiesto la permanencia de otra nube de severidad; y el señor Glegg, tras advertirlo después de sentarse a tomar las gachas con leche con que acostumbraba a poner frugal freno al hambre matutina, decidió prudentemente dejar a la señora Glegg la oportunidad de decir la primera frase, ya que dado la delicadeza del ánimo de una dama, temía ofenderla con el menor comentario. La gente que parece disfrutar con su mal carácter sabe cómo conservarlo intacto infligiéndose privaciones. Así lo hacía la señora Glegg: aquella mañana se había preparado el té más flojo que de costumbre y no quiso tomar mantequilla. Era una dura prueba que tantos deseos de pelea y tan ávidos de aprovechar la menor oportunidad no obtuvieran ni un solo comentario por parte del señor Glegg para ejercitarse. Pero, poco a poco, su silencio resultó suficiente y el señor Glegg oyó finalmente cómo su esposa lo apostrofaba en ese tono tan propio de su bienamada cónyuge.

—¡Magnífico, Glegg! No es mucho lo que recibo a cambio de haber sido tu esposa durante todos estos años. Si es así cómo vas a tratarme, habría preferido saberlo antes de que muriera mi pobre padre y entonces, si hubiera querido un hogar, me habría ido a cualquier otro sitio, puesto que podía elegir.

El señor Glegg dejó de comer gachas y levantó la vista: no con sorpresa, sino con el mudo desconcierto con que contemplamos los misterios repetidos.

—¡Caramba, señora Glegg! ¿Y ahora qué he hecho?

—¿Que qué has hecho? ¿Qué has hecho? Cuánto lo siento.

Como no se le ocurría ninguna respuesta adecuada, el señor Glegg regresó a sus gachas.

—En este mundo hay maridos que habrían sabido hacer algo distinto que ponerse en el bando de todos los demás y en contra de su propia esposa —prosiguió la señora Glegg tras una pausa—. Quizá *m*'equivoque y puedas sacarme de mi error, pero siempre he oído decir que la tarea del marido es apoyar a su esposa en lugar de alegrarse y sentir como un triunfo que los demás la insulten.

—Pero ¿qué motivos tienes para decir eso? —preguntó el señor Glegg, algo enfadado, porque aunque era un hombre amable, no era tan dócil como Moisés—. ¿Cuándo me he alegrado de que te derroten?

—Hay comportamientos que resultan peores que las palabras, Glegg. Preferiría que me dijeras a la cara la poca estima en que me tienes a que *t*'esforzaras por manifestar que todo el mundo, menos yo, tiene razón, y bajes a desayunar por la mañana, cuando apenas he dormido una hora en toda la noche, y me pongas cara larga y *m*'hagas menos caso que a la porquería que pisan tus zapatos.

—¿Cara larga? —preguntó el señor Glegg en un tono de enfadada burla —. Vaya, eres como el borracho que cree que todo el mundo ha bebido demasiado, excepto él.

—¡No te rebajes utilizando un lenguaje ordinario conmigo, Glegg! Te da un aspecto lamentable, aunque no puedas verte —espetó la señora Glegg con enérgico tono compasivo—. Los hombres de tu posición deben dar ejemplo y hablar de modo más sensato.

—Claro, pero ¿escuchas las palabras sensatas? —contestó el señor Glegg bruscamente—. Lo más sensato que puedo decirte te lo dije ya anoche: que *t'*equivocas al pedir que te devuelvan el dinero cuando está invertido de modo seguro, todo por una pequeña riña, y esperaba que esta mañana hubieras cambiado de opinión. Pero si quieres recuperarlo, no te des prisa porque sembrarás más discordia en la familia: espera a que aparezca una bonita hipoteca. Ahora tendrías que pedirle al abogado que se pusiera a buscarte una inversión, y *t'*embarcarías en gastos interminables.

La señora Glegg pensó que aquello sí era digno de ser tenido en consideración, pero echó la cabeza hacia atrás y emitió una interjección gutural para indicar que su silencio era sólo un armisticio, no una paz. Y las hostilidades no tardaron en estallar de nuevo.

—Te agradecería que me sirvieras una taza de té, señora Glegg —dijo el señor Glegg al ver que, en contra de lo habitual, no se lo servía en cuanto terminaba las gachas. Ella alzó la tetera ladeando un poco la cabeza.

—Me alegra oír que *m* 'agradeces algo, señor Glegg. No se puede decir que se *m* 'agradezca mucho lo que hago por los demás en este mundo. Aunque en tu familia nunca ha habido una mujer que estuviera a mi altura, Glegg, y eso mismo diría si estuviera en mi lecho de muerte. No sólo *m'* he comportado siempre bien con los tuyos y ninguno de ellos puede decir lo contrario, aunque no son mis iguales y nadie conseguirá nunca que yo afirme semejante cosa.

—Será mejor que no encuentres más defectos en mi familia hasta que dejes de pelearte con la tuya, señora Glegg —dijo el señor Glegg con enfadado sarcasmo—. Si no es mucha molestia, quisiera la jarra de leche.

—Estas palabras son las más falsas que has dicho en tu vida, señor Glegg —dijo la señora, vertiendo leche con inusual profusión, como si le dijera que, puesto que quería leche, la tendría como venganza—. Y sabes perfectamente que son falsas. No soy mujer que se pelee con los suyos: tal vez tú sí lo seas, porque sé que lo has hecho.

—¡Vaya! Entonces, ¿cómo llamas a lo de ayer, eso de salir de la casa de tu hermana en plena pataleta?

—Nunca me pelearía con mi hermana, señor Glegg, y miente quien diga lo contrario. El señor Tulliver no lleva mi sangre, y fue él quien se peleó

conmigo y *m'*echó de la casa. Pero tal vez habrías preferido que me quedara para que me insultaran, señor Glegg; tal vez *t* 'ofendió no oír más ofensas ni lenguaje grosero vertido contra tu esposa. Pero permite que te diga que eso es una vergüenza para ti.

—Pero ¿alguien ha oído alguna vez algo semejante en esta parroquia? —exclamó el señor Glegg, enfadándose de veras—. Una mujer a la que se le da de todo, que se le permite conservar todo su dinero, que disfruta de una calesa recién tapizada con un gasto considerable, que cuando yo muera tendrá mucho más de lo que puede esperar… ¡y se comporta así, mordiendo y despotricando como un perro rabioso! ¡Es inconcebible que Dios haya hecho así a las mujeres! —El señor Glegg pronunció estas últimas palabras con triste agitación y, a continuación, apartó la taza de té y golpeó la mesa con ambas manos.

—Muy bien, señor Glegg. Si eso es lo que sientes, es mejor saberlo —exclamó la señora Glegg, quitándose la servilleta y doblándola con gran agitación—. Pero si crees que recibo más de lo que merezco, permite que te diga que tengo derecho a esperar muchas cosas que no tengo. Y en cuanto a eso de que parezco un perro rabioso, tienes suerte de que no *t* 'avergüencen públicamente por el modo en que me tratas, porque no lo pienso soportar y no lo quiero soportar más…

Llegado a este punto, la voz de la señora Glegg dejó traslucir que estaba al borde de las lágrimas, de modo que se calló y tocó la campanilla violentamente.

—Sally —dijo, levantándose de la silla y hablando con voz ahogada—. Enciende el fuego en el piso de arriba y echa las persianas. Glegg, pide que te sirvan para comer lo que *t'* apetezca. Yo tomaré gachas.

La señora Glegg recorrió la habitación en dirección a la pequeña librería, tomó el *Descanso eterno de los* Santos de Baxter y se lo llevó al piso superior. Era el libro que acostumbraba a tener abierto ante ella en ocasiones especiales: por las mañanas de los domingos lluviosos, cuando le llegaba la noticia de una muerte en la familia o cuando, como en este caso, la pelea con el señor Glegg se había desarrollado una octava por encima de lo habitual.

Sin embargo, la señora Glegg se llevó consigo al piso superior algo que, junto con el *Descanso eterno de los* Santos y la sopa de gachas, tal vez contribuyera a calmarla gradualmente y hacerle soportar la existencia hasta poco antes del té: por un lado, la sugerencia del señor Glegg de que bien podía dejar las quinientas libras hasta que apareciera una buena inversión y, por otro, la insinuación parentética sobre lo mucho que heredaría a su muerte. El señor Glegg, como todos los hombres de carácter parecido, era tremendamente reservado en relación con su testamento, y la señora Glegg, en los malos momentos, presentía que, como otros maridos de los que había oído hablar, tal vez acariciara el mezquino proyecto de incrementar el pesar por su muerte dejándola en muy mala situación, en cuyo caso estaba firmemente decidida a no contratar apenas plañideras y no llorar más que si fuera un segundo marido. Pero si le demostraba alguna ternura testamentaria, resultaría muy triste pensar en él, pobre hombre, cuando se hubiera ido, así como en sus tonterías con las flores y hortalizas, e incluso su insistencia en los caracoles resultaría conmovedora cuando se hubiera terminado. Una serie de pensamientos contribuyó a ofrecerle una imagen halagüeña y conciliatoria del futuro: sobrevivir al señor Glegg y loar su memoria como hombre que, al margen de sus debilidades, se había comportado bien con ella a pesar de sus numerosos parientes pobres; aguardar la frecuente llegada de los intereses y esconderlos en los diversos rincones para desorientar a los ladrones más ingeniosos (porque, para la señora Glegg, los bancos y las cajas fuertes anulaban el placer de la propiedad: antes habría preferido tomar el alimento en forma de pastillas); y, por último, que el vecindario y su familia la miraran con respeto, pues no hay nada como la dignidad de una viuda rica. De manera que cuando el buen señor Glegg, tras recuperar el buen humor cavando, conmovido por la visión de la silla vacía de su esposa con la labor en un rincón, subió al piso y le contó que habían estado doblando las campanas por el pobre señor Morton, la señora Glegg contestó magnánimamente, como si nunca hubiera recibido una ofensa.

—Ah, alguien heredará un buen negocio.

El libro de Baxter llevaba abierto al menos ocho horas, porque eran casi las cinco, y si a la gente le gusta pelearse con frecuencia, se deduce, como

corolario, que sus riñas no pueden superar determinados límites.

El señor y la señora Glegg charlaron amablemente aquella noche sobre los Tulliver: el señor Glegg llegó a reconocer que Tulliver tenía una habilidad especial para meterse en líos y que era capaz de labrarse su propia ruina; y la señora Glegg, dándole en parte la razón, declaró que era indigno de ella tener en cuenta la conducta de un hombre como aquel y que, por su hermana, dejaría que conservara las quinientas libras un poco más, porque si lo invertía en una hipoteca percibiría únicamente el cuatro por ciento.

Capítulo XIII

El señor Tulliver sigue enmarañando la madeja de la vida

Gracias a este cambio de opinión de la señora Glegg, a la señora Pullet le resultó sorprendentemente fácil su tarea mediadora. En realidad, la señora Glegg la hizo callar bruscamente por haberse atrevido a dictar a su hermana mayor cuál era el comportamiento correcto en asuntos de familia. El argumento de la señora Pullet sobre el mal efecto que causaría en el vecindario el que la gente pudiera decir que había una pelea en la familia resultaba especialmente ofensivo. Si el buen nombre de la familia sólo estaba amenazado por la señora Glegg, la señora Pullet podía dormir tranquila.

—Supongo que nadie espera —señaló la señora Glegg, zanjando el asunto— que me presente en el molino antes de que Bessy venga a verme, o que vaya y me arrodille delante del señor Tulliver para pedirle perdón por hacerle un favor; yo no voy con mala intención y cuando el señor Tulliver me hable de modo cortés, yo le hablaré de la misma manera. Nadie tiene motivos para decirme cómo hay que comportarse.

En vista de que no era necesario inquietarse por los Tulliver, la tía Pullet se relajó y volvió a las molestias sufridas la víspera por culpa de los hijos de esa casa aparentemente tan desafortunada. La señora Glegg oyó una narración detallada, a la cual la notable memoria del señor Pullet añadió algunos datos; y, mientras la tía Pullet se compadecía de la mala suerte de la pobre Bessy con sus hijos y manifestaba el proyecto que le rondaba por la

cabeza de pagar la educación de Maggie en un internado lejano, que, aunque no le aclarara la piel, bien podría enderezar algunos de sus otros defectos la tía Glegg culpaba a Bessy por su debilidad y apelaba a todos los testigos que pudieran estar vivos cuando los niños Tulliver se torcieran irremediablemente, para que declararan que ella, la señora Glegg, ya lo había dicho desde el principio, y señalaba que le asombraba cómo sus palabras iban haciéndose realidad.

—Entonces, ¿puedo visitar a Bessy y decirle que no estás enfadada y que todo queda como antes? —preguntó la señora Pullet, justo antes de salir.

—Sí, puedes hacerlo, Sophy —dijo la señora Glegg—. Puedes decírselo al señor Tulliver y a Bessy, porque no estoy dispuesta a comportarme mal aunque los demás se comporten mal conmigo: sé que me corresponde, como hermana mayor, dar ejemplo en todos los sentidos, y así lo hago Nadie puede decir lo contrario sin mentir.

Teniendo en cuenta el estado de satisfacción con su propia magnanimidad en que se encontraba la señora Glegg, dejo que el lector juzgue el efecto que le causó la recepción de una breve carta del señor Tulliver esa misma tarde, después de que se marchara la señora Pullet, informándole de que no tenía que preocuparse más por sus quinientas libras porque le serían devueltas a más tardar en el curso del mes siguiente, junto con los intereses debidos hasta la fecha de pago. Y, además, que el señor Tulliver no deseaba comportarse de modo descortés con la señora Glegg y sería bien recibida en su casa siempre que quisiera visitarlos, pero que no deseaba recibir favores suyos, ni para sí mismo ni para sus hijos.

La desdichada señora Tulliver, debido a la irreprimible esperanza de que causas similares produjeran resultados distintos, había acelerado la catástrofe. Sabía por experiencia que el señor Tulliver muchas veces tendía a actuar de un modo concreto simplemente porque le decían que no podía hacerlo, porque lo compadecían por su supuesta incapacidad o de alguna manera le ofendían en su orgullo: sin embargo, ese día pensó que todos comerían más contentos si le comunicaba, cuando llegara a tomar el té, que la hermana Pullet había ido a arreglar las cosas con la hermana Glegg, de modo que no tendría que inquietarse por devolverle el dinero. El señor

Tulliver seguía firmemente decidido a conseguirlo, pero la noticia lo empujó definitivamente a escribir una carta a la señora Glegg que eliminara toda posibilidad de error. ¡Pero bueno! ¡Que la señora Pullet fuera a rogar en su nombre! El señor Tulliver no acostumbraba a escribir cartas por voluntad propia, y encontraba que la relación entre el lenguaje oral y el escrito, normalmente llamada ortografía, era una de las cosas más enredosas de este mundo tan enredoso. Pero tal como sucede con la escritura vehemente, llevó a cabo la tarea en menos tiempo de lo habitual y, si su ortografía difería de la empleada por la señora Glegg, qué más daba: ella pertenecía, como él mismo, a una generación en la cual la ortografía respondía únicamente a criterios personales.

La señora Glegg no cambió su testamento como consecuencia de esta carta y no privó a los niños Tulliver de la quinta y sexta parte que les correspondía de sus mil libras, porque ella tenía sus principios. Nadie podría decir de ella, cuando hubiera muerto, que no había dividido su dinero con justicia perfecta entre sus familiares: en cuestión de testamentos, las cualidades personales estaban subordinadas al hecho fundamental de la sangre; y decidir la distribución de las propiedades por capricho y no hacer que lo legado guardara una proporción directa con el grado de parentesco equivaldría a una ignominia que le habría amargado la vida. Ésta siempre había sido una cuestión de principio en la familia Dodson, como manifestación del sentido del honor y rectitud que constituía una orgullosa tradición en familias como aquella, una tradición que ha sido la sal de nuestra sociedad rural.

Sin embargo, aunque la carta no alteró los principios de la señora Glegg, hizo que la ruptura familiar resultara mucho más difícil de arreglar, debido a la opinión que la señora Glegg se hizo del señor Tulliver: rogó que los demás comprendieran que, a partir de aquel momento, no quería saber nada de él; al parecer, su estado mental estaba demasiado deteriorado para que ella le dedicara ni un minuto de su pensamiento. Hasta la víspera del día en que Tom debía ir al colegio, a principios de agosto, la señora Glegg no visitó a su hermana Tulliver. En esta ocasión, no bajó de la calesa y demostró su disgusto de modo notorio al no dar ningún consejo y abstenerse de toda crítica, ya que, como comentó a su hermana Deane,

«Bessy debe soportar las consecuencias de tener semejante marido, aunque lo siento mucho por ell», y la señora Deane coincidió en que Bessy era digna de lástima.

Aquella noche, Tom dijo a Maggie:

—¡Vaya! Maggie, la tía Glegg vuelve a venir: me alegro de irme al colegio. ¡Ahora te las cargarás tú siempre!

Maggie estaba tan triste por la marcha de Tom que la broma le pareció muy antipática, y aquella noche lloró hasta quedarse dormida.

La rápida reacción del señor Tulliver exigió más rapidez todavía para encontrar la persona adecuada que le prestara quinientas libras bajo hipoteca. «No debe ser cliente de Wake», se dijo y, sin embargo, al cabo de dos semanas resultó lo contrario; no porque la voluntad del señor Tulliver flaqueara, sino porque así fueron las circunstancias. El cliente de Wakem fue la única persona adecuada que pudo encontrar. El señor Tulliver, como Edipo, tenía un destino y en este caso podría alegar, también como Edipo, que, mas que llevar a cabo una acción, ésta le fue impuesta.

Libro segundo

Tiempo de estudio

Capítulo I

El primer semestre de Tom

Los padecimientos de Tom Tulliver durante el primer trimestre que pasó en King's Lorton al distinguido cuidado del reverendo Walter Stelling fueron considerables. En la academia del señor Jacobs, la vida no se le había presentado como un problema difícil: tenía muchos compañeros para divertirse y, puesto que se le daban bien todos los juegos activos, especial mente la lucha, ocupaba el lugar destacado que le parecía consustancial con su personalidad; el señor Jacobs, conocido con el mote de «el Viejo Anteojo» debido a las gafas que usaba habitualmente, no imponía ningún respeto penoso; y si era propio de los viejos hipócritas como él escribir con buena letra, rodear su firma de arabescos, no vacilar en la ortografía y declamar «Me llamo Norva».[11] sin equivocarse, lo cierto era que Tom se alegraba de no correr peligro alguno de alcanzar metas tan mediocres. No tenía la menor intención de convertirse en un maestro aficionado al rapé sino en un hombre importante, como su padre, que cuando era joven iba de caza y montaba una magnífica yegua negra, el animal más hermoso que pudiera verse: Tom había oído cientos de veces cantar sus alabanzas. Él también quería ir a cazar y que todo el mundo lo respetara. Reflexionaba que a las personas mayores nadie les preguntaba si tenían buena letra o cometían faltas de ortografía: cuando fuera un hombre sería el amo de todo y haría lo que le viniera en gana. Le había costado mucho reconciliarse con la idea de que debía seguir estudiando y no iba a ocuparse de negocio de su padre, que siempre había considerado extraordinariamente agradable

porque consistía simplemente en ir de acá para allá a caballo dar órdenes y acudir al mercado; y le parecía que un clérigo le daría muchas lecciones sobre las Escrituras y probablemente le haría aprender el Evangelio y la epístola de los domingos, así como la colecta. Sin embargo, en ausencia de toda información específica, le resultaba imposible imaginar una escuela y un maestro totalmente diferentes a la academia y al señor Jacobs. De manera que para no hallarse en situación de inferioridad, en caso de que encontrara compañeros afables, no olvidó llevar consigo una cajita con cápsulas fulminantes que, aunque no para otra cosa, le serian útiles para impresionar a los chicos desconocidos al dar idea de su familiaridad con las armas de fuego. Aunque el pobre Tom no se engañaba con las ilusiones de Maggie, sí lo hacía con las propias, que la larga experiencia en King's Lorton se encargaría de disipar.

No llevaba allí ni quince días cuando le resultó evidente que la vida, complicada no sólo con la gramática latina sino con un modo nuevo de pronunciar el inglés, resultaba una empresa muy difícil, oscurecida por una densa bruma de timidez. Como el lector habrá podido observar, Tom no era una excepción entre los chicos de su edad en lo que respecta a la facilidad de trato; pero tan grande era la dificultad que le suponía articular un mero monosílabo en respuesta al señor o la señora Stelling que incluso temía que le ofrecieran más pudín en la mesa. En cuanto a las cápsulas fulminantes, estaba casi decidido, movido por la amargura, a tirarlas a un estanque cercano: porque no sólo era el único alumno, sino que empezaba a experimentar cierto escepticismo ante las armas y a sentir que su concepción de la vida se resquebrajaba. Al parecer, el señor Stelling no tenía buen concepto de las armas ni tampoco de los caballos; y, sin embargo, a Tom le resultaba imposible despreciarlo tal como había desdeñado a «el Viejo Anteojo». Tom era totalmente incapaz de distinguir si las virtudes que aparentaba el señor Stelling eran auténticas: sólo mediante una amplia comparación de hechos los adultos más sabios pueden discernir el retumbar de un barril del de un trueno.

El señor Stelling era un hombre que todavía no había cumplido los treinta, de buena talla, pecho amplio, cabello tieso y rubísimo y grandes ojos grisáceos que mantenía siempre muy abiertos; poseía una sonora voz

de bajo y un aire de seguridad desafiante cercano a la petulancia. Había iniciado su carrera con gran energía y pretendía causar una impresión considerable en sus congéneres. El reverendo Walter Stelling no estaba dispuesto a pertenecer al «bajo cler» durante toda la vida y albergaba una determinación, auténticamente británica, de abrirse paso en el mundo En primer lugar, como maestro, ya que algunas escuelas secundarias contaban con plazas magníficas y el señor Stelling tenía intención de conseguir una de ellas; pero también como predicador, pues se había propuesto adoptar un estilo brillante para que su congregación creciera con admiradores procedentes de otras parroquias cercanas, y, además, causar gran sensación cuando tuviera que sustituir a algún colega con menor don de palabra. Había optado por un estilo improvisado, cosa que en parroquias rurales como la de King's Lorton parecía poco menos que una maravilla. Algunos fragmentos de Massillon y Bourdaloue, que el señor Stelling sabía de memoria, producían gran efecto cuando los recitaba con voz grave, pero otros discursos de su cosecha, menos poderosos, pronunciados con la misma voz sonora e imponente impresionaban a sus oyentes en grado similar. La doctrina del señor Stelling no pertenecía a ninguna escuela en concreto: a lo sumo, se distinguía por un toque de evangelicalismo, ya que eso era lo que se llevaba en el momento en la diócesis a la que pertenecía King's Lorton. En definitiva, el señor Stelling era un hombre decidido a prosperar en su profesión y progresar de modo incuestionable por méritos propios, puesto que no le interesaban las posibles promesas de un dudoso parentesco con un gran abogado que todavía no había alcanzado el puesto de Lord Chancellor. Es natural que un clérigo de intenciones tan vigorosas contraiga algunas pequeñas deudas al principio: no es de esperar que viva de acuerdo con la modestia propia de quien pretende ser durante toda su vida un pobre pastor y, si los pocos cientos que el señor Timpson había dado como anticipo de la herencia de su hija no bastaban para comprar muebles hermosos, una pequeña bodega y un piano de cola, así como para plantar un espléndido jardín de flores, al reverendo señor Stelling no le quedaba otra opción que procurárselos por otros medios o pasarse sin todo ello, y esta última alternativa supondría demorar absurdamente los frutos de un éxito seguro. El señor Stelling era un individuo de tan ancho pecho y tan

decidido que se sentía capaz de cualquier cosa: se haría famoso por agitar la conciencia de sus oyentes y no tardaría en editar algún clásico griego e inventar algunas interpretaciones nuevas. Todavía no había escogido la obra, porque llevaba casado poco más de dos años y había dedicado gran parte de su tiempo libre a la señora Stelling; pero ya había manifestado sus intenciones a aquella magnífica mujer y ésta sentía gran confianza en su marido y en su capacidad para entender de maravilla cosas como aquélla.

Pero en aquel momento el paso inmediato hacia el éxito futuro consistía en potenciar el talento de Tom Tulliver durante ese semestre, ya que, debido a una coincidencia singular, había iniciado tratos con otro alumno del mismo lugar y tal vez consiguiera que se decidieran a su favor si se hacía público que el joven Tulliver que, tal como había comentado el señor Stelling en la intimidad conyugal, era un tosco jovenzuelo, conseguía progresar prodigiosamente en un breve período de tiempo. Por ese motivo se mostraba severo en las lecciones: resultaba evidente que la capacidad de aquel muchacho nunca podría desarrollarse a través de la gramática latina a menos que se lo tratara con cierta severidad. Ello no se debía a que el señor Stelling fuera adusto o desabrido, sino todo lo contrario: en la mesa se mostraba festivo con Tom y corregía su provincialismo y su comportamiento con humor, pero esta doble novedad contribuía a la confusión y la vergüenza de Tom, que no estaba acostumbrado a bromas como las del señor Stelling y por primera vez en su vida experimentaba la dolorosa sensación de estar fuera de lugar. En una ocasión, mientras descubrían la carne asada, el señor Stelling le preguntó:

—Dígame, Tulliver. ¿Qué prefiere declinar, el latín o el asado que le ofrezco?

Incluso en los momentos más serenos un juego de palabras habría supuesto un problema difícil para Tom; en aquel instante, el muchacho se sumió en un estado de desconcierto y alarma que lo oscureció todo, excepto la sensación de que preferiría no saber nada del latín. Naturalmente, contestó que el asado y acogieron su respuesta con risas y bromas, de lo que dedujo que, de algún modo misterioso, había rechazado la carne y había quedado como «un tont». Si hubiera podido ver cómo un compañero pasaba por dolorosos trances similares y los superaba con buen humor, no habría

tardado en aprender a encajarlos. Pero cuando un padre envía a su hijo como único alumno de un clérigo, paga por una forma u otra de educación: la primera consiste en disfrutar para sí de todo el abandono del reverendo caballero; la segunda, en soportar toda su atención. Durante los meses iniciáticos que Tom pasó en King's Lorton, el señor Tulliver pagó un alto precio por este segundo privilegio.

Tras dejar allí a Tom, el respetable molinero y malteador regresó a su casa en un estado de gran satisfacción espiritual. En buena hora se le había ocurrido consultar a Riley sobre la educación de Tom. El señor Stelling tenía los ojos tan abiertos y hablaba de modo tan franco y pragmático mientras respondía con un «Sin duda, señor mío, sin duda». «Entiendo, entiendo: usted quiere que su hijo se abra paso en la vid» a las observaciones que el señor Tulliver formulaba con dificultad, que éste había quedado encantado al ver en él a un clérigo cuyos conocimientos se podían aplicar a la vida cotidiana. El señor Tulliver consideraba al reverendo Stelling el hombre más listo que había conocido nunca, con la única excepción del abogado Wylde, al que había oído en las últimas sesiones; y lo cierto era que se parecían mucho: ambos tenían por costumbre suspender los pulgares de las aberturas del chaleco. El señor Tulliver no era el único que tomaba la osadía por sagacidad: la mayoría de los legos pensaban que Stelling era un hombre agudo y de notables capacidades: en cambio, sus colegas lo tenían por un individuo anodino. Sin embargo, Stelling contó al señor Tulliver varias historias sobre «el capitán Swin» y los incendiarios[12], y le pidió consejo sobre la alimentación de los cerdos con un talante tan secular y juicioso, con tanta labia, que el molinero pensó que aquello era exactamente lo que quería para Tom. No le cabía la menor duda de que se trataba de un hombre de primera categoría, familiarizado con todas las ramas del conocimiento, que sabía exactamente lo que debía aprender Tom para estar a la altura de los abogados —cosa que el pobre señor Tulliver ignoraba y por ello tuvo que fiarse de sus propias inferencias—. No sería justo reírse de él, ya que he conocido a personas mucho más instruidas que hacían deducciones igualmente amplias y mucho menos sabias.

En cuanto a la señora Tulliver, tras averiguar que los puntos de vista de la señora Stelling en relación con el oreado de la ropa de cama y la

frecuencia con que se presentaba el hambre en un chico en edad de crecer coincidían plenamente con los suyos y que, además, la señora Stelling, a pesar de su juventud y de estar todavía a la espera de su segundo parto, había pasado por una experiencia muy similar a la suya en relación con el comportamiento y el carácter de la niñera que atendió a su hijo durante el primer mes, mientras se alejaban expresó a su marido su gran satisfacción por dejar a Tom con una mujer que, a pesar de su juventud, parecía muy sensata y maternal, y pedía consejo con tantísima amabilidad.

—De todos modos, deben de tener una buena posición económica —comentó la señora Tulliver—, porque en la casa todo es muy bonito, y el vestido de moaré que llevaba le habrá costado su buen dinero. Mi hermana Pullet tiene uno igual.

—Imagino que tendrá algunos ingresos suplementarios, además de la parroquia; quizá el padre de ella les dé algo. Y Tom les supondrá un centenar más y no muchas molestias, según dice él mismo: dice que, para él, enseñar es algo natural. Es estupendo —añadió el señor Tulliver, volviendo la cabeza hacia un lado y cosquilleando al caballo en el costado mientras reflexionaba.

Quizá debido a que enseñar era algo natural en él, el señor Stelling se aplicó con esa uniformidad de método e indiferencia hacia las circunstancias que caracterizan los actos de los animales, supuestamente bajo la enseñanza directa de la naturaleza. El afable castor del señor Broderip[13], tal como nos cuenta este encantador naturalista, ponía tanto afán en construir una alta presa en un tercer piso londinense como si se encontrara en un río o un lago del norte de Canadá. La función del animal, llamado «Binn» era construir: la ausencia de agua o de progenie eran circunstancias que nada tenían que ver con él. Con ese mismo instinto infalible, el señor Stelling se dispuso a inculcar la geometría de Euclides y la Gramática latina de Eton en la cabeza de Tom Tulliver. Ésta era la única base de una instrucción sólida: todos los demás métodos de educación eran pura charlatanería y sólo podían producir majaderos. Un hombre bien asentado sobre esta base tan firme podía observar con una sonrisa de conmiseración la exhibición de conocimientos diversos o especiales por parte de personas con una educación irregular: todo aquello estaba muy

bien, pero era imposible que esas personas pudieran formarse opiniones sólidas. Al defender estas ideas, los puntos de vista del señor Stelling no estaban sesgados, como podría ser el caso de otros profesores, por la excesiva extensión o precisión de sus propios conocimientos y, en lo que respecta a Euclides, ninguna opinión podría haber más libre de parcialidad personal. El señor Stelling distaba de verse arrastrado por el entusiasmo intelectual o religioso: por otra parte, tampoco abrigaba ningún escepticismo Consideraba que la religión era algo excelente, que Aristóteles era una gran autoridad, que los deanatos y las prebendas eran instituciones útiles, que Gran Bretaña era el providencial baluarte del Protestantismo y que la fe en lo invisible constituía un gran apoyo para los espíritus afligidos: creía en todas estas cosas de la misma manera que un hotelero suizo cree en la belleza del paisaje que lo rodea y en el placer que proporciona a los visitantes con temperamento artístico. Y así confiaba en su método de educación: no le cabía duda de que hacía lo mejor para el hijo del señor Tulliver. Cuando el molinero se refirió de modo vago e inseguro a hacer mapas y sumar, el señor Stelling lo tranquilizó asegurándole que sabía lo que se esperaba de él, ya que ¿cómo podía ser que aquel buen hombre tuviera una idea razonable de la cuestión? La tarea del señor Stelling consistía en enseñar al muchacho del único modo correcto: en realidad, no conocía otro, ya que no había perdido el tiempo adquiriendo conocimientos inusuales.

No tardó en catalogar a Tom como un muchacho completamente tonto, ya que, si bien mediante arduo trabajo, podía llegar a meterle alguna declinación en la cabeza, era imposible inculcarle algo tan abstracto como la relación entre los casos y las terminaciones para que pudiera reconocer un posible genitivo o un dativo. El señor Stelling creía que aquello era algo más que torpeza natural: sospechaba que se trataba de obstinación o, por lo menos, de indiferencia, y amonestaba a Tom severamente por su falta de aplicación.

—No se interesa usted por lo que hace, caballero —decía el señor Stelling, y el reproche era dolorosamente cierto.

Desde el momento en que le habían explicado la diferencia, Tom nunca había tenido la menor dificultad en distinguir un pointer de un setter, y su

perspicacia no era en absoluto deficiente. Imagino que era similar a la del reverendo Stelling, porque Tom podía deducir con exactitud cuántos caballos avanzaban tras él a medio galope, lanzar una piedra al agua y acertar en el centro de cualquier onda, adivinar con precisión cuántas veces cabía su bastón a lo largo de un campo de juegos y dibujar cuadrados casi perfectos en la pizarra sin tomar ningún tipo de medida. Pero el señor Stelling no tenía en cuenta estas cosas: sólo observaba que las facultades de Tom fracasaban ante las abstracciones odiosamente simbolizadas en las páginas de la Gramática de Eton, y que caía en un estado limítrofe con la idiotez ante la demostración de que dos triángulos dados debían ser semejantes, aunque advertía con gran rapidez y certeza el hecho de que lo fueran. De todo esto el señor Stelling concluyó que, puesto que el cerebro de Tom era particularmente impermeable a la etimología y a las demostraciones, debía ararlo y trabajarlo de modo especial con estos aperos: según su metáfora favorita, la geometría y los clásicos cultivaban la mente para la llegada de toda cosecha posterior. Nada tengo que decir contra la teoría del señor Stelling: si todos debemos recibir la misma educación, su tesis me parece tan buena como cualquier otra. Sólo sé que resultó tan incómoda para Tom Tulliver como si lo hubieran cebado con queso para remediar una deficiencia gástrica que le impidiera digerirlo. ¡Resulta asombroso cómo cambian las cosas si se toma otra metáfora! En cuanto se considera que el cerebro es un estómago intelectual, la ingeniosa imagen de las lenguas clásicas y la geometría como arados y rastras pierde todo sentido. Sin embargo, cualquiera puede seguir a grandes autoridades y considerar que la mente es una página en blanco o un espejo, en cuyo caso los conocimientos sobre el proceso digestivo resultan irrelevantes. Sin duda, fue una idea ingeniosa llamar al camello «el barco del desiert», pero no se puede decir que eso facilite la domesticación de ese animal tan útil. ¡Oh, Aristóteles! Si en lugar de ser el mayor de los clásicos hubieras tenido la suerte de ser el más nuevo de los modernos, ¿acaso no habrías mezclado tus alabanzas a la metáfora como signo de elevada inteligencia con el lamento de que esta última raras veces se muestre en el habla sin aquélla? ¿No te habrías lamentado de que en contadas ocasiones decimos lo que es una cosa si no es afirmando que es algo distinto?[14]

Tom Tulliver, poco dotado para las palabras, no utilizaba metáfora alguna para manifestar su punto de vista sobre el latín: nunca lo denominó instrumento de tortura; hasta bien avanzado el semestre siguiente e iniciado ya en el *Delectus*, no lo definió como una «lat» y «un fastidi». En aquel momento, ante la exigencia de que aprendiera las declinaciones y conjunciones latinas, Tom era tan incapaz de imaginar la causa y la tendencia de sus sufrimientos como lo sería una musaraña aprisionada en la hendidura de un fresno con la finalidad de curar la cojera del ganado. Resulta casi increíble para las personas cultivadas de hoy día que un niño de doce años que no pertenecía en sentido estricto a «las masa», a las que actualmente se atribuye el monopolio de la oscuridad mental, no tuviera una idea clara de que pudiera existir algo parecido al latín en esta tierra: y, sin embargo, eso era lo que sucedía a Tom. Le habría costado largo rato concebir que existiera alguna vez un pueblo que compraba y vendía ovejas y bueyes, y negociaba los asuntos cotidianos de la vida con aquella lengua, y todavía más entender por qué debía aprenderla cuando el nexo con estos asuntos había dejado de ser visible. Las leves ideas que Tom había adquirido sobre los romanos en la academia del señor Jacobs eran correctas, pero no iban más allá del hecho de que «aparecían en el Nuevo Testament». Y el señor Stelling no era hombre partidario de debilitar ni castrar la mente de su alumno simplificando o explicando las cosas, o de reducir el efecto tonificante de la etimología mezclándola con información superficial y superflua como la que se da a las niñas.

No obstante, por extraño que parezca, bajo este vigoroso tratamiento, Tom, más que nunca en toda su vida, parecía una niña. Poseía un gran orgullo que, hasta el momento, se había sentido muy cómodo en este mundo, despreciando a «el Viejo Anteojo» y sustentándose en la conciencia de una serie de derechos incuestionables: pero ahora este mismo orgullo no recibía más que golpes y heridas. Tom era lo bastante perspicaz para darse cuenta de que los criterios del señor Stelling sobre las cosas eran muy distintos y más elevados, a los ojos del mundo, que los de las personas con las que él había convivido, y que medido con éstos, él, Tom Tulliver, parecía zafio y tonto: Tom no era en absoluto indiferente a esto, y su orgullo se encontraba en una incómoda situación que eliminaba el amor propio

habitual en un muchacho y le daba parte de la susceptibilidad de una chica. Poseía un temperamento muy firme, por no decir obstinado, pero no rebelde ni alocado: predominaba en él la sensibilidad y, si se le hubiera ocurrido que podía conseguir mayor viveza en las lecciones y así lograr la aprobación del señor Stelling si permanecía largo rato sobre una pierna o golpeándose la cabeza moderadamente contra la pared —o con cualquier acción voluntaria de ese tipo—, lo habría intentado. Pero lo cierto era que Tom nunca había oído decir que semejantes medidas avivaran el entendimiento o reforzaran la memoria verbal; y no era dado a las hipótesis ni a los experimentos. Se le ocurrió que tal vez conseguiría un poco de ayuda si lo pedía en sus rezos, pero puesto que las plegarias que repetía cada noche eran fórmulas aprendidas de memoria, no se atrevió con la novedad e irregularidad que suponía introducir un párrafo improvisado con una petición de la que no conocía ningún precedente. Sin embargo, un día, cuando fracasó por quinta vez con los supinos de la tercera conjugación y el señor Stelling, convencido de que tenía que deberse al descuido, ya que aquello superaba los límites de cualquier estupidez posible, lo amonestó severamente diciendo que si desperdiciaba la oportunidad de oro que se le ofrecía de aprender los supinos lo lamentaría de mayor, Tom, más abatido que de costumbre, se decidió a probar aquel único recurso, y aquella noche, tras los habituales rezos por sus padres y «su hermanit». (había empezado a rezar por Maggie cuando era una nena) y la petición de ser siempre capaz de cumplir los mandamientos de la Ley de Dios, añadió con el mismo murmullo: «Y, por favor, ayúdame a recordar siempre el latí». Hizo una pausa para pensar si debía rogar también por Euclides, ya que no sabía si debía desear comprenderlo o bien había otro estado mental más adecuado para el caso. Pero, al final, añadió: «Y haz que el señor Stelling diga que no debo seguir con Euclides. Amé».

El hecho de que, al día siguiente, pasara por los supinos sin cometer errores lo animó a perseverar en el apéndice a los rezos y neutralizó el escepticismo derivado de que el señor Stelling siguiera insistiendo en Euclides. No obstante, su fe se quebró con la aparente ausencia de toda ayuda cuando llegó a los verbos irregulares. Parecía claro que su desesperación al verse sometido a los caprichos de las formas verbales del

presente no constituía un *nodus* digno de interferencia, y puesto que aquél era el punto máximo de sus dificultades, ¿de qué servía seguir rezando en petición de ayuda? A esta conclusión llegó en una de las solitarias y aburridas tardes de estudio preparando las lecciones del día siguiente. Aunque odiaba llorar y lo avergonzaba, se le enturbiaban los ojos: no podía evitar pensar con afecto incluso en Spouncer, con el que acostumbraba a discutir. Y pelearse; con él se habría sentido a sus anchas y en situación de superioridad. Y en cuanto jugueteaba con su gran navaja, un fragmento de látigo y otras reliquias del pasado, aparecían ante él, como en un delirio, el molino, el río y Yap enderezando las orejas, dispuesto a obedecer en cuanto Tom dijera: «¡Hala!». Tom, como he dicho antes, nunca había sido tan semejante a una niña, y durante aquella época de verbos irregulares su espíritu se deprimió todavía más debido a la nueva actividad que se le encomendaba en horas libres. La señora Stelling había tenido a su segundo hijo en fechas recientes y, puesto que nada podía resultar más saludable para un muchacho que sentirse útil, la señora Stelling consideraba que le hacía un favor encomendándole la custodia de Laura, su querubín, mientras la niñera permanecía ocupada con el recién nacido, algo enfermizo. Para Tom sería una ocupación agradable sacar a Laura durante las horas más soleadas de los días de otoño, así sentiría que la casa parroquial de Lorton era también su hogar y él era uno más de la familia. Como Laura, el querubín, todavía no sabía andar, llevaba una cinta atada a la cintura por la cual Tom la sujetaba como si fuera un perrito durante los minutos que la niña quería caminar, pero como estos eran escasos, casi siempre daba vueltas y vueltas por el jardín con la preciosa niña en brazos, ahí donde la señora Stelling pudiera verlos desde su ventana, según las órdenes recibidas. Si alguien considera que eso no era justo con Tom y resultaba incluso tiránico, le rogaría que tuviera en cuenta que algunas virtudes femeninas se combinan con dificultad, si es que no son incompatibles: cuando la esposa de un pobre pastor se las ingenia, a pesar de todas sus carencias, para vestir con la máxima elegancia y llevar un peinado que exige que la niñera haga ocasionalmente las funciones de doncella; cuando, además, sus cenas y su salón son muestra de una elegancia y perfección en los detalles para los que las mujeres normales creerían necesario poseer

grandes ingresos, sería poco razonable esperar que contratara a otra niñera o llegara incluso a realizar ella estas funciones. El señor Stelling no pretendía nada semejante: sabía que su esposa hacía maravillas y estaba orgulloso de ella. Tal vez no fuera lo más adecuado para la postura del joven Tulliver caminar cargado con una niña tan pesada, pero hacía así mucho ejercicio paseando y, durante el siguiente semestre, el señor Stelling le buscaría un profesor de gimnasia. Entre los muchos medios por los que el señor Stelling pretendía ser más afortunado que la mayoría de sus congéneres se encontraba la renuncia a dirigir su casa. Se había casado con «la mujercita más dulce de la tierr», según el señor Riley, que conocía los dorados tirabuzones y el rostro sonriente de la señora Stelling desde que era soltera y que, basándose en eso, habría estado dispuesto a declarar que, si alguna vez surgían diferencias domésticas en su matrimonio, sin duda serían culpa del señor Stelling.

Si Tom hubiera tenido peor carácter habría terminado odiando a Laura, el querubín, pero era un muchacho demasiado bondadoso, poseía demasiada fibra de la que se transforma más tarde en verdadera virilidad y deseo de proteger al débil. En cambio, sospecho que odiaba a la señora Stelling y que contrajo una duradera aversión hacia los tirabuzones rubios y las anchas trenzas, que asociaba a la altanería y a la referencia constante a los «debere» de los demás. Sin embargo, no podía menos de jugar con la pequeña Laura y divertirse entreteniéndola: incluso le sacrificó sus cápsulas fulminantes, que ya no confiaba en destinar a fines más altos, con la idea de que el pequeño fogonazo y la detonación le encantarían, aunque no consiguió más que una regañina de la señora Stelling por enseñar a la niña a jugar con fuego. Laura era lo más parecido a un compañero de juegos, ¡y cuánto los echaba de menos! En el fondo de su corazón, deseaba fervientemente que Maggie estuviera con él y estaba casi dispuesto a pasar por alto sus desesperantes despistes; en cambio, cuando estaba en casa, toleraba, como si fuera un gran favor, que Maggie trotara a su lado en las excursiones.

Y, efectivamente, antes de que terminara aquel terrible semestre, Maggie fue de visita. La señora Stelling la había invitado, sin precisar mucho, a pasar unos días con su hermano; de manera que cuando el señor

Tulliver se acercó a King's Lorton a finales de octubre, Maggie fue con él con la sensación de que emprendía un gran viaje y estaba empezando a ver mundo. Fue la primera visita del señor Tulliver, porque el muchacho tenía que aprender a no pensar demasiado en su casa.

—Bien, muchacho —dijo a Tom en cuanto el señor Stelling salió de la sala para anunciar su llegada a su esposa, y Maggie se lanzó a besar a Tom a sus anchas—. ¡Cómo has cambiado! El estudio te sienta bien.

A Tom le habría gustado parecer enfermo.

—Me parece que no estoy muy bien, padre. Desearía que le dijera al señor Stelling que no me hiciera hacer Euclides: creo que me da dolor de muelas —dijo Tom, acordándose del único mal que había padecido en su vida.

—Así que Euclides… ¿Y eso qué es? —preguntó el señor Tulliver.

—Oh, no lo sé: trata de definiciones, axiomas, triángulos y esas cosas. Tengo que aprenderlo en un libro y no tiene ningún sentido.

—¡Vamos, vamos! —le reprendió el señor Tulliver—. No debes decir eso. Tienes que aprender lo que te diga tu maestro, él sabe lo que te conviene saber.

—Yo te ayudaré, Tom —dijo Maggie con cierto aire de consuelo protector—. Me quedaré todo el tiempo que quiera la señora Stelling. He traído la maleta y los delantales, ¿verdad, padre?

—¿Ayudarme tú, tonta? —exclamó Tom, tan divertido por el anuncio que le entraron ganas de desconcertar a Maggie enseñándole una página de Euclides—. Ya me gustaría verte estudiando una de mis lecciones. ¡Caramba, y también latín! Las niñas no aprenden estas cosas, son demasiado tontas.

—Sé perfectamente lo que es el latín —declaró Maggie con aplomo—. Es una lengua: hay palabras latinas en el diccionario. Por ejemplo, está *bonus*, que significa regalo.

—¡Pues te equivocas, señorita Maggie! —contestó Tom, ocultando su asombro—: ¡Te crees muy lista, pero *bonus* significa «buen»: es de *bonus, bona, bonum*!

—De acuerdo, pero también puede significar «regal». —Contestó Maggie categóricamente—. Puede significar varias cosas: sucede con casi

todas las palabras: por ejemplo, «plant», que puede querer decir vegetal o una parte del pie.

—Bien dicho, nena —rió el señor Tulliver mientras Tom experimentaba cierto desagrado ante los conocimientos de Maggie, aunque le alegraba mucho la idea de que fuera a quedarse con él. Aquel engreimiento desaparecería en cuanto examinara los libros.

La señora Stelling, en su insistente invitación, en ningún momento sugirió que Maggie permaneciera con ellos más de una semana, pero el señor Stelling, tras colocarla entre sus rodillas y preguntarle dónde había robado aquellos ojos negros, insistió en que se quedara con ellos quince días. Maggie pensó que el señor Stelling era un hombre encantador y el señor Tulliver se sintió muy orgulloso de dejar a su mocita en un lugar donde tendría oportunidad de demostrar lo lista que era ante desconocidos que sabrían valorarlo, de manera que acordaron que no la irían a buscar antes de una quincena.

—Ahora, ven conmigo al estudio, Maggie —dijo Tom cuando su padre se alejaba—. Oye, tonta ¿por qué sacudes la cabeza? —prosiguió; porque aunque Maggie llevaba el cabello peinado tras las orejas, seguía imaginando que se lo apartaba de los ojos—. Pareces una loca.

Vaya, no puedo evitarlo —contestó Maggie con impaciencia—. No te metas conmigo, Tom. ¡Oh, cuántos libros! —exclamó al ver las librerías del estudio—. ¡Cuánto me gustaría tener tantos!

—Si no puedes leer ni uno: están todos en latín —contestó Tom con aire triunfal.

—No, todos no —contestó Maggie—: puedo leer el lomo de éste: Historia *de la decadencia y caída del Imperio Romano*.

—Bueno, ¿y qué significa? Si ni siquiera lo entiendes —dijo Tom, meneando la cabeza.

—Pero puedo averiguarlo enseguida —contestó Maggie con aire burlón.

—¿Cómo?

—Miro dentro y veo de qué trata.

—Ni se te ocurra, señorita Maggie —contestó Tom al ver que extendía la mano hacia el volumen—. El señor Stelling no permite que nadie toque los libros sin su permiso y, si lo sacas, me las cargaré yo.

—Bueno, pues entonces enséñame los tuyos —dijo Maggie. Se dio la vuelta, rodeó el cuello de Tom con los brazos y se frotó la nariz contra sus mejillas.

Tom, feliz de tener a su querida Maggie para discutir y pavonearse, le pasó un brazo por la cintura y empezaron a brincar juntos alrededor de la gran mesa de la biblioteca. Saltaron cada vez con más bríos, hasta que el cabello de Maggie se soltó de detrás de las orejas y empezó a agitarse como un molinillo. Pero las vueltas en torno a la mesa fueron haciéndose cada vez más irregulares hasta que al final tropezaron con el atril del señor Stelling y tiraron los pesados léxicos al suelo. Afortunadamente, el estudio se encontraba en un ala de la casa que sólo tenía planta baja, de modo que la caída no alzó ecos alarmantes, aunque Tom permaneció aturdido y horrorizado durante unos minutos, temiendo la llegada del señor o la señora Stelling.

—Oh, Maggie —dijo Tom por fin, levantando el atril—. En esta casa no hay que hacer ruido, sabes. Y si rompemos algo, la señora Stelling nos hará *peccavi*.

—¿Y qué es eso? —preguntó Maggie.

—Es la palabra latina para regañina —explicó Tom no sin cierta satisfacción por sus conocimientos.

—¿Tiene mal genio? —preguntó Maggie.

—¡Ni te lo imaginas! —contestó Tom, asintiendo con énfasis.

—Me parece que las mujeres tienen peor genio que los hombres —dijo Maggie—. La tía Glegg tiene mucho peor genio que el tío Glegg, y madre me regaña mucho más que padre.

—Bueno, algún día tú serás una mujer —dijo Tom—, así que mejor te calles.

—Pero yo seré una mujer inteligente —dijo Maggie, agitando la cabeza.

—Sí, seguro. Y una presumida. Todo el mundo te tendrá manía.

—Pero tú no, Tom: estaría muy feo porque soy tu hermana.

—Sí, pero si eres antipática, te odiaré.

—¡Si no seré antipática! Me portaré muy bien contigo, y con todos los demás. No me odiarás, ¿verdad, Tom?

—¡Basta, déjalo! Vamos, es hora de que aprenda las lecciones. Mira lo que tengo que hacer —dijo Tom, atrayendo a Maggie hacia sí y mostrándole el teorema, mientras ella se apartaba el cabello tras las orejas y se preparaba para demostrarle que era capaz de ayudarlo con Euclides. Empezó a leer con plena confianza en su capacidad, pero al instante quedó desconcertada y se sonrojó de irritación: era inconfesable, pero debía reconocer su incapacidad y no le gustaba nada sentirse humillada.

—¡Qué tonterías! —dijo—. Y qué feo es esto, nadie necesita entenderlo.

—¡Ah, mira la señorita Maggie! —dijo Tom, quitándole el libro y moviendo la cabeza—. Ahora ves que no eres tan lista como tú te crees.

—¡Oh! —exclamó Maggie haciendo una mueca de disgusto—. Me parece que lo entendería si hubiese estudiado las lecciones anteriores, como tú.

—Pero eso es justo lo que no puedes hacer, señorita sabihonda —replicó Tom—, porque es todavía más difícil cuando sabes lo que viene antes, porque entonces tienes que saber la definición 3 y el axioma v Pero ahora vete, que tengo que estudiar esto. Ten la *Gramática latina, a ver si entiendes algo*.

Tras la mortificación matemática, la gramática latina le pareció tranquilizadora; además, le encantaban las palabras nuevas y no tardó en descubrir un glosario inglés al final que le ayudaría a entender el latín sin gran esfuerzo. Decidió saltarse las normas sintácticas: los ejemplos eran muy interesantes. Las misteriosas frases, extraídas de un contexto desconocido —como extraños cuernos de bestias u hojas de plantas arrancadas, procedentes de alguna región lejana—, prestaban alas a su imaginación y resultaban tanto más fascinantes cuanto que se encontraban en una lengua propia que podía aprender a interpretar. Era muy interesante aquella *Gramática latina*que, según Tom, las chicas no podían aprender: y se enorgullecía de encontrarla interesante. Los ejemplos más fragmentarios eran sus favoritos. *Mors omnibus est communis* no le transmitía otra cosa que la idea de que le gustaría saber latín; pero el afortunado caballero al que todo el mundo felicitaba porque tenía un hijo «dotado con tanta inteligenci» le permitió entregarse a una serie de conjeturas agradables, y andaba

perdida por el «espeso bosque que ninguna estrella puede atravesa», cuando Tom le dijo:

—Anda, Maggie: dame la *Gramática*.

—Tom, es un libro precioso —declaró mientras se levantaba de un brinco del gran sillón para dársela—. Me gusta mucho más que el diccionario. Sería capaz de aprender latín muy deprisa, no me parece nada difícil.

—Ah, ya sé lo que has hecho —dijo Tom—: has estado leyendo lo que pone en inglés al final. Eso puede hacerlo hasta el más asno.

Tom tomó el libro y lo abrió con un aire decidido y eficiente encaminado a sugerir que tenía que estudiar una lección que estaba fuera del alcance de los asnos. Maggie, bastante molesta, se volvió hacia la librería para entretenerse examinando los títulos.

—Mira, Maggie —llamó Tom—, ven a oír si me lo sé. Ponte al extremo de la mesa, donde se sienta el señor Stelling cuando me toma la lección.

Maggie obedeció y cogió el libro abierto.

—¿Dónde vas a empezar, Tom?

—En *Appellativa arborum*, porque voy a repetir todo lo que he aprendido esta semana.

Tom recitó tres líneas con seguridad, y Maggie empezaba a olvidarse de su tarea de apuntador, perdida en la especulación sobre lo que podría significar *más*, palabra que aparecía dos veces, cuando Tom se trabó en *Sunt etiam volucrum*.

—No me digas nada, Maggie; *Sunt etiam volucrum… Sunt etiam volucrum… ut ostrea, cetus…*

—No —dijo Maggie, abriendo la boca y negando con la cabeza.

—*Sunt etiam volucrum* —repitió Tom muy despacio, como si esperara que las palabras que venían a continuación aparecieran por sí solas en cuanto sugiriera que las estaba esperando.

—*C, e, u* dijo Maggie, impacientándose.

—Sí, ya lo sé: cállate —dijo Tom—. *Ceu passer, hirundo, ferarum… ferarum…* —Tom tomó el lápiz y pintó varios puntos en la tapa del libro— *… ferarum…*

—Tom, qué despacio vas —protestó Maggie—. Ut…

—*Ut, ostrea*…

—No, no —dijo Maggie—: *ut, tigris*…

—Ah, sí. Ya sé —dijo Tom—: era *tigris, vulpes*, se me había olvidado: *ut tigris, vulpes, et piscium*.

Trastabillando y repitiéndose, Tom consiguió decir los renglones siguientes.

—Ahora llega lo que acabo de aprender para mañana. Dame el libro un minuto.

Tras farfullar en susurros y con la ayuda de algún puñetazo sobre la mesa, Tom le devolvió el libro.

—*Macula nomina in a*... —empezó.

—No, Tom —dijo Maggie—. No es eso lo que viene a continuación: es *Nomen non «creszens jenitivo*».

—«*Creszens jenitiv*». —exclamó Tom con una carcajada burlona, ya que había aprendido este párrafo para la lección del día anterior y un joven caballero no necesita poseer un conocimiento íntimo ni extenso del latín para advertir errores semejantes—: «*creszens jenitiv*». ¡Qué tonta eres, Maggie!

—Bueno, no hace falta que te rías, Tom: tú tampoco lo recuerdas todo. Estoy segura de que es eso lo que pone, ¿y yo qué sé cómo se pronuncia?

—¡Bah! Ya te he dicho que las niñas no son capaces de aprender latín. Es: *Nomen non crescens genitivo*.

—Muy bien —protestó Maggie, enfurruñada—. Puedo decirlo tan bien como tú. En cambio, tú no te fijas en las pausas: deberías pararte el doble de tiempo en un punto y coma que en una coma y, además, haces las pausas más largas donde no debería haber ninguna.

—Bien, basta de tonterías. Déjame seguir.

Al poco rato fueron a buscarlos para que pasaran el resto de la tarde en el salón, y Maggie se mostró tan vivaracha con el señor Stelling, el cual, sin duda, admiraba lo lista que era, que Tom se sintió desconcertado y alarmado por su audacia.

Sin embargo, Maggie se achantó cuando el señor Stelling hizo referencia a una niña de la que había oído contar que había huido para vivir con los gitanos.

—¡Qué niña tan rara debía de ser! —comentó la señora Stelling con intención de bromear, pero a Maggie no le hacía ninguna gracia que se bromeara a costa de su supuesta rareza. Temía que, a fin de cuentas, el señor Stelling no tuviera buena opinión de ella, y se acostó bastante abatida. Tenía la sensación de que la señora Stelling la miraba como si pensara que tenía el cabello muy feo porque le caía lacio sobre la espalda.

Con todo, durante la visita a Tom, Maggie pasó allí una feliz quincena. Le permitían permanecer en el estudio mientras él recibía clase y, tras sucesivas lecturas, consiguió profundizar en los ejemplos de la gramática latina. El astrónomo que odiaba a todas las mujeres la desconcertaba tanto que un día preguntó al señor Stelling si todos los astrónomos odiaban a las mujeres o si sólo se trataba de aquél en concreto.

—Supongo que todos —dedujo Maggie, anticipándose a su respuesta—. Porque puesto que viven en altas torres, si las mujeres subieran se pondrían a hablar y no les dejarían mirar las estrellas.

Al señor Stelling le divertía muchísimo su cháchara y se llevaban de maravilla. Maggie dijo a Tom que ella también debería asistir a las clases del señor Stelling, igual que él, y aprender las mismas cosas. Sabía que podía entender a Euclides, porque lo había vuelto a mirar y había visto lo que querían decir A B y C: era el nombre de las líneas.

—Estoy seguro de que no puedes —dijo Tom—. Ya se lo preguntaré al señor Stelling.

—Me da igual —contestó con aplomo la descarada niña—: ya se lo preguntaré yo.

—Señor Stelling —dijo aquella misma tarde, cuando se encontraban en el salón—. ¿Podría estudiar a Euclides y todas las lecciones si, en lugar de Tom, su alumna fuera yo?

—No, no podrías —intervino Tom enfadado—. Las niñas no son capaces de estudiar a Euclides: ¿verdad que no, señor?

—Me parece que pueden adquirir nociones de cualquier cosa —contestó el señor Stelling—: poseen una gran capacidad superficial, pero no pueden profundizar en nada. Son rápidas y banales.

Tom, encantado con este veredicto, envió a Maggie una señal de triunfo agitando la cabeza por detrás de la silla del señor Stelling. En cuanto a

Maggie, jamás se había sentido más mortificada: durante su corta vida se había enorgullecido siempre de que la llamaran «rápid» y ahora parecía que esta rapidez era signo de inferioridad. Habría sido preferible ser lenta como Tom.

—¡Ja, ja! ¡Señorita Maggie! —se burló Tom en cuanto estuvieron solos —. Ya ves que no es gran cosa ser rápida. Nunca profundizarás en nada, ya lo sabes.

Y Maggie se sintió tan abrumada por este terrible destino que no tuvo ánimos para contestar.

Pero cuando Luke se llevó en la calesa a esa pequeña muestra de rapidez superficial y el estudio volvió a resultar solitario, Tom la echó tremendamente de menos. Durante el tiempo que había pasado allí, le había ido mejor en clase y se había mostrado más despejado; Maggie había hecho muchas preguntas al señor Stelling sobre el Imperio Romano y quiso saber si realmente existió el hombre que dijo en latín: «No lo compraría por un cuarto ni por una nuez podrid», o si se habían limitado a traducir aquella frase, de modo que Tom había empezado a comprender el hecho de que había existido un pueblo en la tierra tan afortunado como para hablar latín sin tener que aprenderlo con la Gramática de Eton. Esa luminosa idea supuso una importante contribución a los conocimientos históricos que adquirió durante el semestre que, por otra parte, se reducían a un compendio de la historia de los judíos.

A pesar de todo, aquel terrible semestre tocaba a su fin. ¡Con qué alegría contemplaba Tom las últimas hojas amarillas arrastradas por el frío viento! Las tardes oscuras y las primeras nieves de diciembre le parecían más alegres que el sol de agosto; y para contar mejor el paso de los días gracias al cual estaba cada vez más cerca de casa, cuando sólo quedaban tres semanas para las vacaciones clavó veintiún palos en un rincón del jardín y cada día arrancaba uno de un tirón y lo lanzaba a lo lejos con tanta energía que si las estacas hubiera podido viajar tan lejos, habrían llegado al limbo.

Sin embargo, merecía la pena alcanzar, incluso al elevado precio de la gramática latina, la felicidad de ver la brillante luz del salón de su casa desde el puente cubierto de nieve cuando la calesa lo cruzó en silencio: la dicha de pasar del aire frío a la calidez, los besos y las sonrisas del hogar

familiar donde el dibujo de la alfombra, la chimenea y los atizadores constituían «ideas primera» tan imposibles de criticar como la solidez y la extensión de la materia. En ningún lugar nos sentimos tan a gusto como allí donde nacimos, donde quisimos a los objetos antes de que supiéramos elegir y donde el mundo exterior tan sólo parecía una extensión de nuestra personalidad: lo aceptamos y lo quisimos como aceptamos nuestro propio sentido de la existencia y nuestros miembros. Vulgares, incluso feos, nos parecerían los muebles de nuestro primer hogar si los viéramos en una subasta: el gusto en las tapicerías ha mejorado y los pone en ridículo; ¿acaso no es la lucha por conseguir un entorno cada vez mejor la principal característica que distingue al hombre del bruto o, para satisfacer una escrupulosa precisión en las definiciones, lo que distingue al británico del bruto extranjero? Sin embargo, sólo el cielo sabe hasta dónde podría llevarnos esta lucha si nuestros afectos no tendieran a aferrarse a esos objetos inferiores, si las devociones y amores de nuestra vida no se anclaran con profundas raíces en la memoria. El entusiasmo que sentimos por el arbusto de saúco que sobresale por encima de un seto, como si fuera más hermoso que una jara o una fucsia erguida sobre el césped más suave y ondulado, es una preferencia totalmente injustificada desde el punto de vista de un jardinero paisajista o cualquiera de esas otras mentes ordenadas que no sienten ninguna afición que no se base en una superior calidad demostrable. Y, en realidad, prefiero el saúco porque evoca algún recuerdo antiguo: no es una novedad que se dirige a mi sensibilidad actual por ciertas formas y colores, sino un viejo compañero de mi existencia, entretejido con mis alegrías, cuando éstas eran intensas.

Capítulo II

Las vacaciones de Navidad

Aquellas Navidades, el anciano de barbas nevadas y rostro rubicundo cumplió generosamente con su deber y depositó ricos regalos de calidez y color que contrastaban con la escarcha y la nieve.

La nieve cubría los campos y las orillas del río en ondulaciones más suaves que el cuerpo de un niño; se recortaba nítidamente sobre los tejados y hacía destacar su color rojo oscuro con tonos más profundos; se depositaba pesadamente sobre los laureles y abetos hasta que caía con un estremecimiento; vestía de blanco el tosco campo de nabos y transformaba las ovejas en oscuros borrones; los montones de nieve bloqueaban las puertas y aquí y allá, algún olvidado cuadrúpedo se alzaba como petrificado «en erguida tristez»[15]; no había brillos ni sombras, porque los cielos eran una única nube pálida: no había más sonido o movimiento que el del oscuro río que fluía y gemía como una pena inconsolable. El anciano sonreía mientras cubría los campos durante aquel período aparentemente cruel con intención de dar más brillo al hogar, intensificar sus olores y hacer más deliciosa la cálida fragancia de los alimentos: pretendía preparar una dulce cárcel que reforzara los primitivos lazos familiares y conseguir que el resplandor de los rostros humanos familiares fuera tan bienvenido como el de la estrella diurna ahora oculta. Sin embargo, su amabilidad resultaba muy dura para las personas sin hogar, en las casas donde el fuego no era muy cálido y donde la comida poseía escasa fragancia; donde los rostros humanos no poseían un brillo solar, sino la mirada inexpresiva y sombría de

la miseria sin esperanza. Pero el excelente y viejo invierno tenía buena intención; y si todavía no ha aprendido el modo de repartir de modo imparcial sus bendiciones entre los hombres, se debe a que su padre, el Tiempo, con un propósito implacable, sigue ocultando el secreto en su poderoso y lento corazón.

Sin embargo, aquel día de Navidad, a pesar del reciente placer que experimentaba Tom al estar en casa, por un motivo u otro no le pareció tan feliz como los anteriores. El acebo tenía tantas bolitas rojas como siempre, y él y Maggie habían adornado la víspera todas las ventanas, chimeneas y marcos con su buen gusto habitual, entrelazando las bayas de color escarlata del acebo con las negras de las ramas de hiedra. Se habían oído cánticos bajo las ventanas pasada la media noche: a Maggie siempre le parecían cantos sobrenaturales, a pesar de que Tom insistía con desprecio en que los cantantes eran el viejo Patch, el sacristán, y el resto del coro de la iglesia: temblaba sobrecogida cuando sus villancicos la sacaban del sueño, y la imagen de ángeles sentados sobre una nube sustituía siempre a la de unos hombres vestidos de fustán. Con todo, la serenata contribuyó, como de costumbre, a que la mañana siguiente se distinguiera de todas las otras; además, a la hora del desayuno se olió el aroma a tostadas con cerveza; el himno favorito, las verdes ramas y el breve sermón proporcionaron el adecuado carácter festivo a la asistencia a la iglesia; y, después de que los fieles regresaron y se sacudieron los pies para limpiarlos de nieve, los rostros del tío y la tía Moss y sus ocho hijos reflejaron el fuego de la chimenea del salón como otros tantos espejos; el budín de ciruelas fue tan redondo y hermoso como siempre y apareció envuelto en las simbólicas llamas azules, como si lo hubieran arrancado heroicamente del fuego del averno, donde lo habían arrojado los puritanos dispépticos; el postre fue tan espléndido como de costumbre, con sus naranjas doradas, las nueces marrones y el cristalino contraste entre la jalea de manzana y el dulce de ciruela damascena: en todas estas cosas, la Navidad fue como siempre había sido desde que a Tom le alcanzaba la memoria; sólo se distinguió, a lo sumo, porque aquel año se divirtieron más con el trineo y las bolas de nieve.

Las Navidades eran alegres, pero no se sentía así el señor Tulliver. Estaba furioso y desafiante, y Tom, aunque siempre respaldaba a su padre en las disputas y compartía sus ofensas, esta vez participaba de los sentimientos que oprimían a Maggie cuando, llegado el relajamiento de los postres, el señor Tulliver narró sus problemas en tono cada vez más alto e irritado. La atención que en otras circunstancias Tom habría concentrado en el vino y las nueces se distrajo con la sensación de que en el mundo uno tenía enemigos muy pillos y que los asuntos de los adultos difícilmente podían llevarse sin grandes altercados. Pero a Tom no le gustaban las riñas que no podían zanjarse al instante con una pelea justa contra un adversario fácil de zurrar; y la conversación irritada de su padre lo incomodaba, aunque nunca le había pasado por la cabeza que su padre pudiera estar equivocado.

La encarnación concreta del principio maligno que ahora provocaba la decidida resistencia de Tulliver era el señor Pivart, el cual poseía tierras curso arriba del Ripple y había empezado a tomar medidas para regarlas, cosa que (basándose en el principio de que el agua era el agua) era, sería o llegaría a ser lesiva para los derechos legítimos del señor Tulliver a explotar la energía hidráulica. Dix, que también tenía un molino en el río, era un débil ayudante del viejo Pero Botero en comparación con Pivart: el arbitraje había hecho que Dix se comportara con sensatez y el asesoramiento de Wakem no lo había llevado muy lejos: no, el señor Tulliver consideraba que Dix, desde un punto de vista legal, no había conseguido nada y, a la luz de la intensidad de su indignación contra Pivart, su desprecio hacia un adversario confundido como Dix empezaba a parecer una relación amistosa. Aquel día no tenía otro público masculino que el señor Moss, el cual, tal como declaró, «*na* sabía de molino» y sólo podía asentir ante los argumentos del señor Tulliver en calidad de pariente y de deudor; pero Tulliver no hablaba con la fútil intención de convencer a su audiencia, sino para desahogarse: mientras tanto, el buen señor Moss hacía ímprobos esfuerzos para mantener los ojos abiertos a pesar del sopor que una comida inusualmente buena provocaba en su cansado cuerpo. La señora Moss, más sensible al tema e interesada en cualquier cosa que afectara a su hermano,

lo escuchaba e intervenía en cuanto sus ocupaciones maternales se lo permitían.

—Caramba, el nombre de Pivart es nuevo por aquí, hermano, ¿verdad? —preguntó—. No era propietario en época de nuestro padre, ni en la tuya, antes de que me casara.

—¿Nuevo? Sí, claro que es un apellido nuevo —afirmó el señor Tulliver con enfado—. El molino de Dorlcote lleva en nuestra familia más de cien años y nunca nadie ha oído hablar de que un tal Pivart se mezclara en los asuntos del río, hasta que llegó este individuo y compró la granja de Bincome antes de que nadie se diera cuenta. ¡Pero ya me encargaré yo de *pivarlo*! —añadió el señor Tulliver, alzando el vaso con la sensación de que había definido su decisión con toda nitidez.

—Espero que no te veas obligado a ir a los tribunales, hermano —aventuró la señora Moss con cierta inquietud.

—No sé a qué me veré obligado, pero sí sé a qué lo obligaré con sus acequias y sus *riegadíos*, si es que las leyes son capaces de hacer justicia. Sé perfectamente quién está detrás de todo esto: Wakem respalda e incita a Pivart. Sé que Wakem le dice que la ley no puede hacer nada contra él: pero Wakem no es el único en manejar la ley. Hace falta un buen granuja para ganarlo, pero los hay que saben más que él, porque, ¿cómo es posible si no que perdiera el pleito de Brumley?

El señor Tulliver era un hombre absolutamente honrado y se enorgullecía de serlo, pero consideraba que los fines de la justicia sólo podían alcanzarse contratando a un truhán más poderoso que el del contrario. La ley era una especie de pelea de gallos en la que la honradez atropellada debía conseguir un animal de pelea con mayor valor y mejores espolones.

—Gore no es tonto, no hace falta que me lo digáis —anunció a continuación con tono belicoso, como si la pobre Gritty insistiera en destacar la capacidad del abogado—, pero no sabe tanto de leyes como Wakem. Y el agua es un tema muy especial, no se puede coger con una horca; por eso resulta tan complicado para el Diablo y los abogados. Con el agua, está muy claro lo que está bien y lo que está mal, si se mira sin tapujos; un río es un río, y si tienes un molino, tienes que tener agua para

que le dé vueltas; y no sirve de nada decirme que los *riegadíos* de Pivart y esas tonterías no me van a parar la rueda: sé muy bien lo que es del agua. ¡Mira que contarme a mí lo que dicen los ingenieros! Es de sentido común que las acequias de Pivart me perjudican. Pero si eso dicen sus ingenieros, dentro de poco pondré a Tom a estudiar esas cosas y ya veremos qué pasa.

Tom miró a su alrededor con cierta inquietud al oír este anuncio sobre su futuro y se olvidó de agitar el sonajero que entretenía a la pequeña de los Moss; ésta, que era una niña de ideas muy claras, expresó al instante sus sentimientos con un grito penetrante que no se calmó ni cuando le devolvieron el sonajero, como si nada pudiera aplacar el agravio. La señora Moss se la llevó a toda prisa a otra habitación y expresó a la señora Tulliver, que la acompañaba, la convicción de que la nena tendría buenas razones para llorar, dando a entender que si suponían que lloraba únicamente por el sonajero, no comprendían a la niña. Tras aplacar unos aullidos plenamente justificados, la señora Moss miró a su cuñada y dijo:

—Siento ver a mi hermano tan preocupado por eso del agua.

—Así es tu hermano, señora Moss: nunca vi nada parecido antes de casarme —contestó la señora Tulliver con un reproche implícito. Cuando hablaba con la señora Moss siempre se refería a «tu herman» o, por lo menos, lo hacía cuando la actitud de éste no merecía toda su admiración. La afable señora Tulliver, que jamás en su vida había mostrado enfado por nada, poseía, sin embargo, una versión suavizada de aquel espíritu sin el cual difícilmente podría haber sido al mismo tiempo una Dodson y una mujer. Si bien cuando trataba con sus hermanas se situaba a la defensiva, era natural que, a pesar de ser el miembro más débil de la familia Dodson, fuera vivamente consciente de su superioridad sobre la hermana de su esposo que, además de ser pobre y tender a «colga» de su hermano, poseía la bondadosa docilidad propia de una mujer grande, pacífica, desaliñada y prolífica que albergaba afecto suficiente, no sólo para su marido y sus numerosos hijos, sino también para una serie de parientes colaterales.

—Deseo y ruego que no vaya a los tribunales —dijo la señora Moss—, porque nunca se sabe cómo acaban estas cosas. Y no siempre gana quien tiene razón. Supongo que este señor Pivart es un hombre rico, y los ricos casi siempre se salen con la suya.

—En fin, ya he visto cómo actúan los ricos que hay en mi familia, ya que mis hermanas tienen maridos que pueden permitirse hacer todo lo que quieren —dijo la señora Tulliver, alisándose el vestido con las manos—. Pero algunas veces pienso que me van a volver loca con estas historias de abogados y *riegadíos*, y mis hermanas *m*'echan la culpa, porque no saben lo que es estar casada con un hombre como tu hermano, ¿cómo iban a saberlo? Mi hermana Pullet hace lo que se *l'*antoja de la mañana a la noche.

—Bueno —objetó la señora Moss—: me parece que no me gustaría que mi marido no tuviera cabeza y yo tuviera que pensar por él. Es mucho más fácil hacer lo que gusta al marido que dar vueltas y vueltas pensando en lo que hay que hacer.

—Si hablamos de hacer lo que gusta al marido —replicó la señora Tulliver, imitando pálidamente a su hermana Glegg—, estoy segura de que mucho le habría costado a tu hermano encontrar una esposa que lo dejara hacer a su antojo en todo como yo. Ahora sólo piensa en la ley y los *riegadíos* desde que se levanta hasta que se acuesta, y nunca le llevo la contraria, sólo digo: Tulliver, haz lo que quieras, pero en ningún caso te metas en pleito…

Como hemos visto, la señora Tulliver no carecía de influencia sobre su marido. No hay esposa que no la tenga: siempre puede empujar a su esposo o en un sentido o en el contrario; y entre los diversos impulsos que amenazaban con inclinar al señor Tulliver a «meterse en pleito», sin duda los monótonos ruegos de la señora Tulliver pesaban considerablemente; su actitud podía compararse con la del personaje de aquel proverbio, el padre que tuvo el mérito o la culpa de romper la espalda de un camello cargado de plumas, aunque, desde un punto de vista imparcial, la culpa fuera del peso que soportaba ya el animal, hasta tal punto que no podía sostener una pluma más sin daño. Sin duda, la personalidad de la señora Tulliver no confería a sus débiles súplicas el peso de esa pluma definitiva, pero cada vez que llevaba la contraria a su marido éste veía en ella a un representante de la familia Dodson; y uno de los principios que guiaban al señor Tulliver era hacerles saber que no podrían dominarlo o —para ser más exactos— que un varón Tulliver valía mucho más que cuatro mujeres Dodson, aunque una de ellas fuera la señora Glegg.

Pero ni siquiera un argumento directo procedente de esa típica representante de las Dodson aconsejándole que no recurriera a los tribunales podría haberlo predispuesto tan a favor como el mero recuerdo de Wakem, renovado continuamente por la presencia todos los días de mercado de este abogado excesivamente hábil. Estaba seguro de que Wakem se encontraba, metafóricamente hablando, detrás de los regadíos de Pivart: Wakem había intentado hacer que Dix pleiteara por la presa: no cabía duda de que Wakem había conseguido que Tulliver perdiera el pleito por la servidumbre de paso por el camino y el puente, lo que había convertido sus tierras en vía para cualquier vagabundo que prefiriera aprovechar la oportunidad de dañar la propiedad privada en lugar de caminar, como cualquier hombre honrado, por la carretera principal: todos los abogados eran unos sinvergüenzas en mayor o menor medida, pero la sinvergonzonería de Wakem era especialmente grave porque se aplicaba directamente a atropellar el derecho personificado en los intereses y opiniones del señor Tulliver. Y, como amargura añadida, el agraviado molinero se había visto obligado recientemente, al tomar prestadas quinientas libras, a entrar en contacto con el despacho de Wakem. ¡Aquel individuo con tanta labia y nariz ganchuda! ¡Fresco como una lechuga. Y tan seguro de su juego! Era humillante que el abogado Gore no se le pareciera, sino que fuera calvo, orondo, de modales blandos y manos gruesas: sería imprudente colocar a aquel gallo de pelea ante Wakem. Gore era un individuo astuto: su debilidad no residía en su escrupulosidad, pero no es lo mismo lanzar guiños significativos que ser capaz de ver a través de una pared de piedra, y por muy seguro que estuviera el señor Tulliver de que el agua era el agua y de que Pivart llevaba todas las de perder en ese asunto de los regadíos, recelaba de que Wakem pudiera, contra este hecho incontrovertible, recurrir a algún argumento legal desconocido para Gore. Con todo, si llegaban a los tribunales, tal vez pudiera contratar al abogado Wylde y tener así a ese admirable matón a su favor y no en contra, y la perspectiva de hacer que un testigo de Wakem sudara confundido, tal como había sucedido una vez con el del señor Tulliver, le hacía amar la justicia punitiva.

El señor Tulliver rumiaba sobre estos asuntos tan enredosos durante los trayectos sobre el caballo gris, y movía la cabeza de un lado a otro mientras los platillos de la balanza oscilaban alternativamente; pero el resultado probable no se vislumbraba, y sólo llegaría a él mediante acaloradas y repetidas discusiones en su vida social y doméstica. Aquella fase inicial de la disputa, que consistía en la narración del caso y la exposición de los puntos de vista del señor Tulliver sobre la cuestión en su círculo de conocidos, tomaría un tiempo necesario y, a finales de enero, cuando Tom tenía que volver al colegio, apenas podían detectarse datos nuevos en la declaración de su padre contra Pivart, ni ninguna indicación específica sobre las medidas que se había visto obligado a tomar contra el osado violador del principio que afirmaba que el agua era agua. La repetición, igual que la fricción, tiende a generar más calor que avance, y el acaloramiento del señor Tulliver era cada vez más visible. Si no habían aparecido nuevas pruebas, por lo menos estaba demostrado que Pivart «estaba compinchad» con Wakem.

—Padre —dijo Tom una tarde, hacia el final de las vacaciones—. El tío Glegg dice que el abogado Wakem va a enviar a su hijo con el señor Stelling. No es cierto eso que decían de que lo mandaban a Francia. No querrás que estudie con el hijo de Wakem ¿verdad?

—No importa, hijo —contestó el señor Tulliver—. No aprendas nada malo de él y Ya está. El muchacho es una pobre criatura deforme y de cara se parece a su madre: yo diría que no ha salido al padre. Es señal de que Wakem tiene buena opinión del señor Stelling, si le envía su hijo, y Wakem es un individuo listo que sabe distinguir el grano de la paja.

En el fondo del corazón, el señor Tulliver estaba orgulloso de que su hijo disfrutara de los mismos privilegios que el de Wakem: pero Tom no estaba muy de acuerdo: habría preferido que el hijo del abogado no fuera deforme, porque así habría podido arremeter contra él con la libertad que se deriva de una postura moral superior.

Capítulo III

El nuevo compañero de estudios

Un húmedo y frío día de enero, Tom regresó a sus estudios: el día estaba en consonancia con aquella severa fase de su destino. Si no hubiese llevado en una bolsa un paquete de azúcar cande y una pequeña muñeca articulada de madera para Laurita, ninguna perspectiva de ilusión habría animado tanta tristeza. Pero le gustaba pensar que Laura extendería las manitas y avanzaría los labios para recibir trocitos de azúcar cande, y, para íntensificar estos placeres imaginarios, sacó él paquete, hizo un agujerito en el papel y mordió un par de cristalitos, lo que tuvo un efecto tan reconfortante en el reducido espacio con olor a humedad situado bajo la capota de la calesa que repitió más de una vez el proceso durante el camino.

—Bien, Tulliver: nos alegramos de volverlo a ver —saludó el señor Stelling efusivamente—. Quítese las prendas de abrigo y entre en el estudio hasta la hora de cenar. Allí encontrará un buen fuego y a un compañero nuevo.

Tom sintió una molesta inquietud cuando se quitó la bufanda de lana y demás abrigo. Había visto a Philip Wakem en Saint Ogg's, pero siempre había apartado la mirada tan rápidamente como había podido. Le habría molestado tener como compañero a un chico deforme aunque Philip no hubiera sido hijo de un mal hombre. Y Tom tenía la sensación de que el hijo de un mal hombre no podía ser muy buena persona. Su padre, por ejemplo, era un hombre bueno y no habría vacilado en pelear con quien se atreviera a

afirmar lo contrario. Siguió al señor Stelling al estudio sumido en una mezcla de turbación y desafío.

—Tulliver, estreche la mano a su nuevo compañero —dijo el caballero al entrar en el estudio—, el señor Wakem. Los dejo para que vayan conociéndose. Supongo que ya saben algo el uno del otro, puesto que proceden del mismo lugar.

Tom se sintió confuso y torpe mientras Philip se ponía en pie y le lanzaba una mirada tímida. No le apetecía adelantarse y tenderle la mano, y no estaba dispuesto a decir: «Hola, ¿cómo está usted?» de buenas a primeras.

El señor Stelling dio media vuelta y cerró la puerta tras de sí prudentemente: la timidez de los muchachos desaparece con la ausencia de los mayores.

Philip era demasiado orgulloso y demasiado tímido para caminar hasta Tom. Advirtió o, para ser más exactos, sintió, que Tom tenía aversión a mirarlo: a casi todo el mundo le disgustaba hacerlo; además, cuando andaba, su deformidad resultaba más notoria. De modo que no se estrecharon la mano y ni siquiera hablaron; Tom se aproximó al fuego para calentarse y, de vez en cuando, lanzaba miradas furtivas a Philip, que parecía absorto en el dibujo de un objeto tras otro en el trozo de papel que tenía delante. Había vuelto a sentarse y, mientras dibujaba, pensaba en qué podría decir a Tom e intentaba vencer la repugnancia a dar el primer paso.

Tom empezó a mirar cada vez más y durante más tiempo el rostro de Philip, porque podía examinarlo sin ver la joroba, y no le pareció una cara desagradable: era mayor, y se preguntó cuántos años tendría más que él. Un experto en anatomía —o incluso bastaría un fisonomista— habría reparado en que la deformidad de la columna de Philip no era congénita, sino resultado de un accidente en la infancia; pero no se podía esperar de Tom la capacidad de distinguir semejante cosa: para él, Philip era simplemente un jorobado. Tenía una vaga idea de que la deformidad del hijo de Wakem guardaba alguna relación con la sinvergonzonería del abogado, de la que había oído hablar con tanta frecuencia a su padre con acalorado énfasis; y sentía también cierto temor de que fuera un individuo resentido que, al no ser capaz de luchar abiertamente, empleara modos encubiertos para hacer

daño. En el vecindario de la academia del señor Jacobs había un sastre jorobado al que se consideraba un personaje desagradable; los chicos más preocupados por el bien común corrían tras él abucheándolo con el mero pretexto de sus cualidades morales insatisfactorias; de modo que Tom no carecía de modelo por el que guiarse. Sin embargo, el rostro de aquel chico triste no podía ser más distinto que el del feo sastre, si bien Tom consideró lastimoso que el cabello castaño que lo enmarcaba se ondulara y rizara en las puntas como el de una muchacha. Aquel Wakem era un sujeto pálido y raquítico y resultaba evidente que no sería capaz de jugar a nada digno de mención; sin embargo, manejaba el lápiz de modo envidiable y, por lo que parecía, dibujaba sin gran dificultad. ¿Qué estaría retratando? Tom había entrado ya en calor y deseaba que sucediera algo nuevo. Sin duda, resultaba más agradable tener como compañero a un jorobado malhumorado que mirar la lluvia por la ventana y dar patadas al zócalo de madera en total soledad; tal vez sucediera algo —«una pelea o algo»—, y Tom pensó que le gustaría dejar bien claro a Philip que ni se le ocurriera gastarle bromas maliciosas. De repente, avanzó por delante del hogar y miró hacia el papel de Philip.

—¡Caramba! ¡Si eso es un burro con serones, y un perro, y perdices en un trigal! —exclamó, pues la admiración le había soltado la lengua—. ¡Atiza! ¡Me encantaría dibujar así! Voy a aprender a dibujar este semestre, me pregunto si podré aprender a pintar perros y burros.

—Oh, puedes dibujarlos sin aprender —contestó Philip—. A mí nadie me ha enseñado.

—¿Nadie te ha enseñado? —preguntó Tom, desconcertado—. ¡Vaya! Cuando pinto perros, caballos y cosas de ésas, las cabezas y las patas me salen mal, aunque sé muy bien cómo deberían ser. Sé dibujar casas y todo tipo de chimeneas: de las que están pegadas a la pared, ventanas en el tejado y cosas de esas. De todos modos, seguro que podría dibujar perros y caballos si lo intentara de nuevo —añadió, pensando que Philip podría suponer erróneamente que se daba por vencido si se mostraba demasiado sincero en relación con la imperfección de sus logros.

—¡Oh, claro que sí! —contestó Philip—. Es muy fácil. Sólo tienes que mirar bien las cosas y dibujarlas una y otra vez. Lo que te salga mal una

vez, lo cambias a la siguiente.

—¿Seguro que no te han enseñado nada de nada? —preguntó Tom desconcertado, empezando a sospechar que la jorobada espalda de Philip bien podría ser origen de unas facultades notables—. Pensaba que habías ido al colegio durante mucho tiempo.

—Sí —contestó Philip con una sonrisa—. Me han dado clases de latín, griego y matemáticas… caligrafía y esas cosas.

—¡Ah! Pero bueno, no te gustará el latín, ¿verdad? —preguntó Tom, bajando la voz y adoptando un tono confidencial.

—Bueno… no me quita el sueño.

—Ah, quizá es porque todavía no has llegado a las *Propriae quae maribus* —dijo Tom, meneando la cabeza, como si dijera: «Ése es el punto crítico: es fácil hablar hasta que se llega all».

Philip sintió cierta amarga complacencia ante la previsible estupidez de aquel niño bien formado de aspecto activo; pero su extrema sensibilidad y su deseo de llevarse bien hacían de él un chico educado, de modo que contuvo el deseo de reír.

—Ya he dado toda la gramática, ya no tengo que estudiarla —contestó discretamente.

—Entonces, seguro que no estudias las mismas lecciones que yo —contestó Tom algo decepcionado.

—No, pero quizá pueda ayudarte. Me encantaría ayudarte, si puedo.

Tom no le agradeció el ofrecimiento porque estaba absorto pensando que el hijo de Wakem no parecía tan malo como podía esperarse.

—Oye —preguntó—, ¿tú quieres a tu padre?

—Sí —contestó Philip, sonrojándose intensamente—. ¿Acaso no quieres tú al tuyo?

—Oh, sí… pero quería saberlo —contestó Tom, avergonzado de sí mismo al ver que Philip se había ruborizado y se sentía incómodo. No sabía qué pensar sobre el hijo del abogado Wakem y se le había ocurrido que si Philip no quería a su padre eso le ayudaría a resolver su perplejidad.

—¿Y ahora vas a aprender a dibujar? —preguntó para cambiar de tema.

—No —contestó Philip—. Mi padre quiere que me dedique a otras cosas.

—¿Cómo el latín, Euclides y cosas de esas? —preguntó Tom.

—Sí —contestó Philip, que había dejado el lápiz y descansaba la cabeza en una mano mientras Tom se inclinaba hacia delante, apoyado en ambos codos, y contemplaba con creciente admiración el perro y el burro.

—¿Y a ti no te fastidia? —preguntó Tom, con gran curiosidad.

—No; me gusta saber lo que saben los demás. Y no tardaré en estudiar lo que me gusta.

—No sé por qué hay que estudiar latín —dijo Tom—. No sirve para nada.

—Forma parte de la educación de un caballero —contestó Philip—. Todos los caballeros aprenden las mismas cosas.

—¡Caramba! ¿Crees que *sir* John Crake, el dueño de los lebreles, sabe latín? —preguntó Tom, que con frecuencia había pensado que le gustaría parecerse a *sir* John Crake.

—Naturalmente, lo estudió cuando era pequeño —contestó Philip- Aunque supongo que lo ha olvidado.

—Oh, bueno. Entonces, puedo hacer lo mismo —afirmó Tom sin ninguna intención epigramática y seriamente satisfecho ante la idea de que, en lo que al latín respectaba, éste no sería un obstáculo en su semejanza con *sir* John Crake—. Uno sólo lo tiene que recordar mientras está en el colegio, igual que tiene que aprender muchos fragmentos del *Speaker*. El señor Stelling es muy maniático, ¿no lo sabías? Te lo hace repetir diez veces si te equivocas y dices una cosa por otra… No perdona ni una letra, te lo aseguro.

—¡Oh, me da igual! —contestó Philip, incapaz de retener una carcajada —. Recuerdo las cosas con facilidad. Y algunas lecciones me gustan mucho. Me gusta mucho la historia de Grecia y todo lo relacionado con los griegos. Me habría gustado ser griego y luchar contra los persas, regresar a mi país y escribir tragedias, o que me escuchara todo el mundo por mi sabiduría, como a Sócrates, y morir gloriosamente.

(Como bien puedes observar, lector, a Philip no le faltaban deseos de impresionar con su superioridad intelectual a aquel bárbaro bien formado).

—¡Vaya! ¿Los griegos fueron grandes guerreros? —preguntó Tom, al que la noticia abría nuevas perspectivas. ¿Tienen alguna historia como la de

David y Goliat, o la de Sansón? Son los únicos trozos que me gustan de la historia de los judíos.

—¡Oh, los griegos tienen muchas historias de ésas! Por ejemplo, con los héroes de los primeros tiempos, que mataban animales salvajes, igual que Sansón. Y en la Odisea, que es un bonito poema, sale un gigante mejor que Goliat: se llamaba Polifemo, tenía un solo ojo en mitad de la frente, y Ulises, que era un hombre pequeño pero muy listo y astuto, le clavó en el ojo una estaca ardiendo y lo hizo bramar como miles de toros.

—¡Oh, qué divertido! —exclamó Tom, alejándose de un brinco de la mesa y golpeando el suelo con uno y otro pie—. Oye, ¿podrías contarme cosas así? Porque yo no voy a aprender griego, sabes… ¿o sí? —añadió, dejando de saltar alarmado, no fuera a estar equivocado—. ¿Los caballeros tienen que aprender griego?… ¿Crees que el señor Stelling me hará estudiar griego?

—No, creo que no. Seguro que no —contestó Philip—. Pero puedes leer estas historias sin saber griego, las tengo en inglés.

—Oh, es que no me gusta leer. Preferiría que me las contaras tú. Pero sólo las de peleas, ¿sabes? Mi hermana Maggie siempre quiere contarme historias, pero son tonterías. Cosas de chicas. ¿Podrás contarme muchas historias de luchas?

—¡Oh, sí! Muchísimas. No sólo las de los griegos. Te puedo contar las de Ricardo Corazón de León y Saladino, y las de William Wallace, Robert Bruce y James Douglas… Sé muchísimas.

—Eres mayor que yo, ¿verdad? —preguntó Tom.

—Bueno, ¿cuántos años tienes? Yo tengo quince.

—Yo voy a cumplir catorce —dijo Tom—. Pero en la academia de Jacobs zurraba a todos los demás. Allí estaba antes de venir aquí. Y los ganaba a todos jugando al *bandy* y trepando. Y me gustaría que el señor Stelling nos dejara ir a pescar. Podría enseñarte. Puedes pescar, ¿verdad? Sólo tienes quedarte de pie bien quieto.

Tom, a su vez, quería inclinar la balanza a su favor. Aquel jorobado no debía dar por hecho que su familiaridad con las historias de combates lo ponía a la altura de un verdadero luchador como Tom Tulliver. Philip se estremeció ante esta alusión a su incapacidad para los deportes activos.

—No me gusta nada pescar —contestó casi irritado—. Creo que los pescadores parecen tontos, ahí sentados contemplando una caña hora tras hora, o lanzando el sedal una y otra vez para no atrapar nada.

—Pero no dirás que parecen idiotas cuando sacan un gran lucio, te lo aseguro —contestó Tom, que en su vida había pescado nada «grand», pero cuya imaginación se esforzaba con entusiasmo en defender el honor del deporte. No cabía duda de que el hijo de Wakem tenía sus cosas desagradables y debía mantenerlo a raya. Afortunadamente para la armonía de aquella primera conversación, en aquel momento los llamaron a cenar y Philip no pudo seguir desarrollando sus inconsistentes puntos de vista sobre la pesca, pero Tom se dijo: eso era exactamente lo que habría debido esperar de un jorobado.

Capítulo IV

La joven idea[16]

La alternancia de sentimientos de este primer diálogo entre Tom y Philip se mantuvo en sus relaciones, incluso tras varias semanas de convivencia escolar. Tom no olvidaba que, en tanto que hijo de un «bribó», Philip era su enemigo natural, y nunca superó por completo la repulsión que le inspiraba su deformidad: Tom se aferraba tenazmente a las impresiones recibidas: tal como sucede a las personas en las que la simple percepción predomina sobre el pensamiento y la emoción, lo externo se impuso de modo definitivo. Y, sin embargo, le resultaba imposible no apreciar la compañía de Philip cuando éste se encontraba de buen humor: era una gran ayuda para los ejercicios de latín, que Tom consideraba como una especie de acertijo que sólo se podía resolver gracias a un afortunado azar; y podía contarle fantásticas historias de combates sobre Hal del Wynd[17], por ejemplo, y otros héroes que Tom tenía en gran aprecio porque la emprendían a mamporros con todos. No estimaba mucho a Saladino, cuya cimitarra podía partir en dos un almohadón en un instante, porque ¿a quién se le ocurría partir almohadones? Era una historia tonta y no tenía el menor interés en volver a oírla. Pero cuando Robert Bruce, montado en el poni negro, se ponía en pie sobre los estribos y alzaba su hacha de guerra para partir en dos el yelmo y el cráneo del demasiado apresurado caballero en Bannockburn, entonces Tom se identificaba plenamente y, si hubiera tenido un coco a mano, lo habría partido de inmediato con el atizador de la chimenea. Cuando Philip estaba de buenas, daba gusto a Tom en la medida

de sus posibilidades y describía los golpes y la furia de los combates con toda la artillería de epítetos y símiles a su alcance. Pero no siempre estaba contento o de buen humor. Los arrebatos de mal humor o de irritada susceptibilidad que mostró en el primer encuentro eran síntoma de un trastorno recurrente debido en parte a cierta irritabilidad nerviosa y en parte a la amargura que le producía su deformidad. Cuando era presa de uno de esos ataques de susceptibilidad, cada mirada le parecía cargada de piedad ofensiva o de rechazo mal reprimido, aunque sólo fuera de indiferencia pero Philip la sentía como un niño del sur recibe el helado aire de una primavera septentrional. La torpe actitud protectora que adoptaba el pobre Tom cuando se encontraban en el exterior hacía que algunas veces Philip se volviera con violencia contra el bienintencionado muchacho y que sus ojos, por lo general tristes y tranquilos, relampaguearan. No es de extrañar que Tom se mostrara receloso con el jorobado.

No obstante, la habilidad autodidacta de Philip para el dibujo constituía otro nexo de unión entre ambos: porque Tom se había encontrado, ante su disgusto, con que su nuevo profesor de dibujo no le daba perros ni burros como modelos, sino arroyos, puentes rústicos y ruinas con suaves sombras a lápiz que sugerían una naturaleza satinada; y puesto que el interés de Tom por lo pintoresco en el paisaje se encontraba todavía latente, no es de extrañar que las producciones del señor Goodrich le parecieran una forma de arte poco interesante. Dado que el señor Tulliver tenía la imprecisa intención de que Tom se dedicara a algún trabajo relacionado con el dibujo de planos y mapas, cuando había visto al señor Riley en Mudport se había lamentado de que Tom no estuviera aprendiendo nada de eso, por lo cual el atento consejero sugirió que Tom recibiera clases de dibujo. Al señor Tulliver no debía importarle pagar un poco más: si Tom se convertía en un buen dibujante, sería capaz de utilizar el lápiz con cualquier propósito. De modo que se ordenó que Tom recibiera clases de dibujo, ¿y a quién mejor que el señor Goodrich, considerado el más destacado de su profesión en doce millas a la redonda de King’s Lorton, podía haber escogido el señor Stelling como maestro? Gracias a él, Tom aprendió a afilar muchísimo el lápiz y a representar un paisaje «en líneas generale», lo que, sin duda, debido a su afición por los detalles, encontraba tremendamente aburrido.

Recordará el lector que todo esto sucedía en aquellas épocas oscuras en que no existían academias de dibujo, antes de que los maestros de escuela fueran invariablemente hombres de integridad escrupulosa y antes de que los clérigos fueran todos hombres de mente abierta y varia cultura. En aquellos días menos favorecidos, es bien cierto que existían algunos clérigos de escasa inteligencia y grandes ambiciones, cuyos ingresos —por una lógica confusión de la que la diosa Fortuna, siendo a un tiempo mujer y llevando los ojos vendados, es especialmente responsable— no guardaban proporción con sus necesidades sino con su inteligencia, con la que los ingresos carecen de todo vínculo inherente. Aquellos caballeros debían resolver el problema de adaptar la proporción entre sus necesidades y sus rentas; y puesto que no es fácil aniquilar las necesidades, parecía más sencillo incrementar los ingresos. Sólo había un modo de hacerlo: todas las ocupaciones bajas en las que los hombres se ven obligados a realizar un buen trabajo por un bajo precio estaban prohibidas a los clérigos; ¿era culpa suya si no tenían otro recurso que cobrar muy caro un mal trabajo? Además, ¿cómo podía esperarse que el señor Stelling supiera que la tarea de educar era delicada y difícil? No tenía de ello mayor idea de la que podría poseer sobre técnicas de excavación un animal con capacidad de taladrar la roca. Las facultades del señor Stelling se habían formado, desde muy pronto, para cavar en línea recta, y tampoco andaba muy sobrado de ellas. Sin embargo, entre los contemporáneos de Tom cuyos padres enviaban a sus hijos a estudiar con un clérigo y, pasado el tiempo, advertían su ignorancia, muchos eran menos afortunados que Tom Tulliver. En aquella época lejana, la educación era casi siempre cuestión de suerte —de mala suerte—. La disposición con que se toma un taco de billar o una caja de dados es de sobria certeza comparada con la de los padres de otros tiempos, como el señor Tulliver, cuando escogían un colegio o un tutor para sus hijos. Aquellos hombres excelentes, que se habían visto obligados a escribir durante toda su vida de acuerdo con un sistema fonético improvisado y, a pesar de esta desventaja, habían conseguido tener éxito en los negocios y ganar el dinero suficiente para dar a sus hijos un mejor punto de partida en la vida, debían arriesgarse en lo que respectaba a la conciencia y la competencia del maestro cuya carta circular caía en sus manos. Y parecía

prometer mucho más de lo que se les habría ocurrido nunca pedir, incluida la devolución de la ropa blanca, la cuchara y el tenedor. Tenían suerte si conocían a algún pañero ambicioso que no hubiera dedicado su hijo a la Iglesia y este joven caballero, a la edad de veinticuatro años, no hubiera puesto fin a sus disipaciones estudiantiles mediante un matrimonio imprudente; de no ser así, estos padres inocentes, deseosos de conseguir lo mejor para sus hijos, sólo podían escapar del hijo del pañero Participando en la fundación de un colegio por el que no hubieran pasado todavía los inspectores, donde dos o tres chicos podían disfrutar para ellos solos de las ventajas de un gran edificio de altos techos, de un director desdentado, cegato y sordo, cuyo erudito desorden y desinterés recompensaban con trescientas libras por cabeza; sin duda, se contrataba a un profesor maduro, pero toda madurez tiende a degenerar hacia un estado menos apreciado en el mercado.

Así pues, Tom Tulliver, comparado con muchos otros jóvenes británicos de su época que han tenido que abrirse paso en la vida con algunos fragmentos de conocimientos más o menos relevantes y una ignorancia notoria, no resultaba muy desafortunado. El señor Stelling era un hombre saludable y de ancho pecho con el porte de un caballero, la convicción de que un chico en edad de crecer necesita carne suficiente y con cierta amabilidad campechana que le hacían desear ver a Tom con buen aspecto y buen apetito: no era hombre de conciencia refinada ni profundo conocimiento de los infinitos asuntos que afectaban a su quehacer cotidiano; no era muy competente en su tarea, pero los caballeros incompetentes también tienen derecho a vivir y, si no poseen una fortuna personal, resulta difícil saber cómo podrían sobrevivir dignamente si no se vincularan a la educación o al gobierno. Por otra parte, la constitución mental de Tom tenía la culpa de que sus facultades no pudieran alimentarse con el tipo de conocimiento que el señor Stelling podía transmitirle. Un chico nacido con una capacidad deficiente para asimilar signos y abstracciones debe sufrir el castigo de esta deficiencia congénita, igual que si hubiera nacido con una pierna más larga que otra; un método de educación sancionado por la larga práctica de nuestros venerables antecesores no debía ceder ante la excepcional cortedad de un chico que se

limitaba a vivir en el presente. Y el señor Stelling estaba convencido de que un chico tan tonto para los signos y abstracciones tenía que serlo forzosamente para todo lo demás, suponiendo que aquel reverendo caballero hubiera podido enseñarle algo más. Nuestros venerables antecesores acostumbraban a aplicar un ingenioso instrumento llamado empulguera que apretaba y apretaba los pulgares para obtener lo que no existía: partían de la convicción de su existencia, ¿y qué otra cosa podían hacer que apretar la empulguera? De la misma manera, el señor Stelling creía firmemente que todos los chicos con alguna capacidad podían aprender la única cosa que debía enseñarse; si eran algo lerdos, no quedaba más remedio que apretar la empulguera e insistir con mayor severidad en los ejercicios y castigar con una página de Virgilio para fomentar y estimular una inclinación demasiado tibia por el verso latino.

Sin embargo, durante este segundo semestre se relajó un poco la empulguera. Philip era tan listo y estaba tan avanzado en sus estudios que el señor Stelling podía alimentar su reputación con mayor facilidad gracias a su inteligencia, necesitada de escasa ayuda, que mediante el complicado proceso necesario para vencer la torpeza de Tom. Los caballeros de amplio pecho y ambiciosas intenciones algunas veces decepcionan a sus amigos y fracasan en su deseo de ascenso social: tal vez los altos logros exijan algún mérito inusual y no baste el inusual deseo de altas recompensas; o tal vez se deba a que estos fornidos caballeros resultan bastante indolentes y su *divinae particulam aurae*[18] está lastrada por un apetito excesivo. Por un motivo u otro, el señor Stelling retrasaba la ejecución de varios briosos proyectos y no abordaba en sus horas libres la edición de la obra griega o cualquier otro trabajo erudito; en cambio, tras encerrarse con llave en su estudio privado con gran decisión, se sentaba a leer alguna de las novelas de Theodore Hook[19]. Tom pudo ir pasando por las lecciones con menos rigor y, puesto que Philip lo ayudaba, conseguía aparentar ciertos confusos conocimientos sin que ningún interrogatorio revelara que su mente se mantenía al margen de todo aquello. Tras este cambio de circunstancias, la escuela le parecía mucho más soportable; y siguió adelante razonablemente satisfecho, adquiriendo una educación deslavazada, sobre todo a partir de cosas que no se consideraban parte de su formación. Su educación consistía,

en realidad, en leer, redactar y escribir sin faltas de ortografía mediante la elaborada aplicación de ideas ininteligibles y repetidos fracasos en su esfuerzo por aprender las cosas de memoria.

Con todo, gracias a esta formación se produjo en Tom una mejoría visible; tal vez porque no era un muchacho abstracto cuya existencia se debiera a la mera necesidad de ilustrar los males de una educación equivocada, sino un chico de carne y hueso con aptitudes no del todo a merced de las circunstancias.

Por ejemplo, mejoró mucho su porte, y parte de este logro se debió al señor Poulter, el maestro del pueblo que debido a su condición de antiguo soldado en la guerra librada en la Península Ibérica fue contratado para la instrucción física de Tom, fuente de placer para ambos. Entre los parroquianos de *The Black Swan* se decía que en otros tiempos causaba terror en los corazones franceses, pero ya no era un individuo formidable. Algo encogido, su pulso temblaba por las mañanas, aunque no por la edad sino debido a la perversidad extrema de los chicos de King's Lorton, que sólo podía soportar con ayuda de la ginebra. Con todo, caminaba erguido con aire marcial, llevaba la ropa cuidadosamente cepillada, los pantalones sujetos al pie con firmeza y las tardes de los miércoles y los sábados, cuando acudía a dar clase a Tom, se encontraba siempre inspirado por la ginebra y los viejos recuerdos, lo que le daba un aire excepcionalmente brioso, como un viejo caballo de batalla al oír un tambor. La instrucción física terminaba siempre con episodios de narrativa bélica mucho más interesantes para Tom que las historias de la *Ilíada* que le contaba Philip; en la *Ilíada* no salía ningún cañón y, además, a Tom le había fastidiado enterarse de que tal vez Héctor y Aquiles no habían existido. Pero el duque de Wellington estaba vivo y no hacía mucho de la muerte de Bonaparte, por lo que no podía sospecharse que los recuerdos del señor Poulter sobre la guerra de la Península fueran míticos. Al parecer, el señor Poulter había destacado en Talavera y contribuido en gran medida al terror que aquel regimiento de infantería inspiraba en el enemigo. Las tardes en que su memoria estaba más estimulada que de costumbre, recordaba que el duque de Wellington había manifestado su estima por aquel buen muchacho llamado Poulter (eso sí, en la más estricta intimidad, no fuera a despertar

envidias). El mismo cirujano que lo atendió en el hospital cuando recibió una herida de bala quedó profundamente impresionado por la superioridad de la carne del señor Poulter: ninguna otra sanaba con rapidez semejante. Respecto a temas más personales que la guerra en que había participado, el señor Poulter se mostraba más discreto y se esforzaba en no dar el peso de su autoridad a ideas erróneas relacionadas con la historia militar. Cuando alguien pretendía conocer lo ocurrido en el sitio de Badajoz, el señor Poulter callaba piadosamente: le habría gustado que hubieran arrollado a aquel bocazas nada más empezar, tal como le había pasado a él, ¡entonces sí que habría podido hablar del sitio de Badajoz! Incluso Tom lo irritaba algunas veces con su curiosidad por otros asuntos militares no relacionados directamente con su experiencia personal.

—¿Y el general Wolfe, señor Poulter? ¿Era un gran soldado, verdad? —preguntaba Tom, que tenía la idea de que todos los héroes militares conmemorados en las enseñas de las tabernas habían luchado contra Bonaparte.

—¡En *asoluto*! —exclamaba Poulter con desprecio—. ¡Ni por asomo!… ¡La cabeza bien alta! —añadía en un tono de mando que encantaba a Tom y lo hacía sentirse como si él solo fuera todo un regimiento—. ¡No, no! —Continuaba el señor Poulter cuando se producía una pausa en la disciplina —. Es mejor que no me hable del general Wolfe. No hizo otra cosa que morirse por su herida: no es una gran *ación*, digo yo. Cualquier otro *s*'habría muerto con mis heridas… Cualquiera de los mandobles que recibí habría *matao* a un tipo como el general Wolfe.

—Señor Poulter —decía Tom en cuanto oía mencionar el sable—. ¡Me gustaría que trajera el sable e hiciéramos ejercicios!

Durante mucho tiempo, el señor Poulter se limitó a negar con la cabeza ante la petición y sonreír con aire de suficiencia, como podría haber hecho Júpiter ante las demandas demasiado ambiciosas de Semele. Pero una tarde, después de que un repentino chaparrón retuviera al señor Poulter durante veinte minutos más de lo habitual en *The Black Swan*, trajo consigo el sable sólo para que Tom lo viera.

—¿Y esta es la verdadera espada con la que combatió en todas esas batallas, señor Poulter? —preguntó Tom, sosteniéndola por la empuñadura

—. ¿Le ha cortado la cabeza a algún francés?

—¿La cabeza? Y hasta tres hubiera cortado si los franceses las tuvieran.

—Pero, además, ¿tenía un fusil y una bayoneta? —preguntó Tom—. Me gustan más el fusil y la bayoneta, porque puedes disparar primero al enemigo y atravesarlo después. ¡Bum! ¡Zas! —Tom representó la pantomima necesaria para indicar la doble diversión de apretar el gatillo y propinar una estocada.

—¡Ah! Pero el sable es lo más adecuado cuando se combate cuerpo a cuerpo —contestó el señor Poulter, cediendo involuntariamente al entusiasmo de Tom y desenvainando el sable tan repentinamente que Tom retrocedió de un ágil salto.

—¡Oh, señor Poulter! Si va a hacer ejercicios con el sable —dijo Tom, consciente de que no se había mantenido impasible en su puesto, como correspondía a un caballero inglés—, deje que vaya a buscar a Philip. Le gustará verlo.

—¡Cómo! ¿Al muchacho jorobado? —exclamó Poulter con desdén—. ¿Y de qué le servirá mirar?

—¡Oh, sabe mucho de luchas! —dijo Tom—. Y de cómo se combatía con arcos y flechas y hachas de guerra.

—Pues que venga, le enseñaré algo distinto de los arcos y las flechas —dijo el señor Poulter, tosiendo e irguiéndose mientras empezaba a mover la muñeca.

Tom corrió a buscar a Philip, que disfrutaba de la tarde de asueto ante el piano del salón, sacando canciones de oído y cantándolas después. Se sentía inmensamente feliz, posado como un amasijo amorfo en la alta banqueta, con la cabeza echada hacia atrás, los ojos clavados en la cornisa que tenía enfrente y la boca abierta con los labios hacia delante, entregado en cuerpo y alma a improvisar unas sílabas sobre una melodía de Arne que le había venido a la cabeza.

—¡Ven, Philip! —exclamó Tom entrando precipitadamente—. No te quedes ahí bramando la-la-la. ¡Ven a ver cómo el viejo Poulter hace ejercicios con el sable en la cochera!

La estridencia de esta interrupción, la disonancia de los tonos de Tom a través de las notas con las que Philip vibraba en cuerpo y alma habrían

bastado para desencadenar su mal genio, aunque no se hubiera tratado de Poulter, el entrenador. Y Tom, en su prisa por encontrar algo que decir para evitar que el señor Poulter pensara que tenía miedo del sable cuando se había apartado de un brinco, se había entusiasmado con la idea de ir a buscar a Philip, aunque sabía de sobra que éste no soportaba siquiera la mención de las clases. Nunca habría hecho nada tan desconsiderado si no se hubiera visto empujado por el orgullo.

Philip se estremeció visiblemente y dejó de tocar. Sonrojándose, dijo con violenta pasión:

—¡Vete de aquí, idiota! ¡No me vengas con esos berridos: sólo sirves para hablar con las bestias de tiro!

No era la primera vez que Tom irritaba a Philip, pero éste nunca lo había atacado con armas verbales que comprendiera tan bien.

—¡Sirvo para hablar con cualquiera mejor que tú, imbécil! —exclamó Tom, inflamándose de inmediato bajo el fuego de Philip—. ¡Sabes que no voy a pegarte porque eres tan débil como una niña, pero yo soy hijo de un hombre honrado y, en cambio, tu padre es un granuja! ¡Todo el mundo lo dice!

Tom, salió de la habitación dando un portazo, extrañamente osado debido al enfado; cerrar las puertas de golpe cerca de la señora Stelling, que probablemente no se encontraba muy lejos, constituía una infracción castigada con veinte líneas de Virgilio. De hecho, la señora en cuestión descendía en aquel momento de su dormitorio, doblemente intrigada por el ruido y la interrupción de la música de Philip. Lo encontró sentado en el taburete, llorando amargamente.

—¿Qué pasa, Wakem? ¿A qué se ha debido este ruido? ¿Quién ha dado un portazo?

Philip alzó los ojos y se los secó apresuradamente.

—Ha sido Tulliver, que ha entrado… para pedirme que fuera con él.

—¿Y cuál es el problema? —preguntó la señora Stelling.

Philip no era su pupilo favorito: era menos servicial que Tom, el cual resultaba útil en muchos aspectos. En cambio, su padre pagaba más que el señor Tulliver y la señora Stelling quería que se convencieran de que se comportaba con él extraordinariamente bien. Sin embargo, Philip acogía sus

gestos de aproximación de la misma manera que un molusco recibiría las caricias destinadas a convencerlo de que saliera de la concha. La señora Stelling no era una mujer tierna y cariñosa: mientras se interesaba por el bienestar de los demás se ocupaba de que le cayera bien la falda, se ajustaba la cintura y se palpaba los rizos con aire preocupado; sin duda, estos gestos describen una gran capacidad para las relaciones sociales, pero no para el amor y sólo éste podría sacar a Philip de su reserva.

—Otra vez me duelen las muelas —dijo éste, en respuesta a su pregunta — me ha hecho perder la calma.

Así había sucedido en otra ocasión, y Philip se alegraba de haberse acordado a tiempo: era como una inspiración que le permitía justificar las lágrimas. Tuvo que aceptar el agua de colonia y rechazó la creosota sin mayor dificultad.

Entre tanto, Tom, que por primera vez había lanzado una flecha envenenada al corazón de Philip, había regresado a la cochera, donde encontró al señor Poulter con expresión seria y petrificada, ofreciendo inútilmente las perfecciones de sus ejercicios con el sable a las ratas, tal vez atentas pero sin duda incapaces de apreciar su talento. No obstante, el señor Poulter era él mismo toda una hueste; es decir, se admiraba más de lo que lo habría hecho todo un ejército de espectadores. No advirtió el regreso de Tom, ya que estaba demasiado absorto en asestar tajos y mandobles —con solemnidad: uno, dos, tres, cuatro— y Tom, no sin una leve sensación de alarma ante la mirada fija de Poulter y el ávido sable que parecía deseoso de hender algo más que el aire, admiró el espectáculo desde tan lejos como pudo. Hasta que el señor Poulter se detuvo y se secó el sudor de la frente, Tom no sintió todo el encanto del ejercicio y deseó que lo repitiera.

—Señor Poulter —rogó Tom cuando por fin éste envainó el sable—, me gustaría que me dejara el sable durante unos días.

—No, no, caballero —contestó el señor Poulter, moviendo la cabeza con firmeza—. Podría cometer con él alguna travesura.

—No, le aseguro que no. Tendré cuidado y no me haré daño. No lo desenvainaré mucho, pero podré rendir armas y todo eso.

—No, no. *L'*aseguro que no pienso dejárselo —contestó el señor Poulter, disponiéndose a marchar—. ¿Qué me diría el señor Stelling?

—¡Por favor, déjemelo, señor Poulter! Si me permite que lo tenga durante una semana le daré una moneda de cinco chelines. ¡Mire! —insistió Tom, tendiéndole la atractiva moneda de plata. El jovenzuelo calculó el efecto causado con tanta exactitud como si fuera un filósofo.

—Bueno —dijo el señor Poulter con aire más grave todavía—. Deberá mantenerlo *guardao*, ya lo sabe.

—¡Oh, sí! Lo guardaré bajo la cama —dijo Tom con entusiasmo— o bien en el fondo del baúl.

—Y veamos ahora si puede desenvainarlo sin hacerse daño.

Tras repetir varias veces el proceso, el señor Poulter se convenció de que había actuado con cuidadosa escrupulosidad.

—Bien, señor Tulliver —dijo—: si acepto la moneda es para asegurarme de que no hará nada malo con el sable.

—Desde luego, señor Poulter —contestó Tom, tendiéndole encantado la moneda de una corona y tomando el sable que, en su opinión, habría sido más manejable si fuera más ligero.

—¿Y si el señor Stelling lo sorprende mientras lo mete en la casa? —preguntó el señor Poulter, embolsándose provisionalmente la corona mientras planteaba esa nueva duda.

—Oh, los sábados por la tarde siempre está en su estudio del piso de arriba —contestó Tom, al que no gustaba actuar a escondidas, pero no desdeñaba emplear una pequeña estratagema por una causa justa. De manera que, con una mezcla de triunfo y temor a encontrarse con el señor o la señora Stelling, se llevó el sable a su habitación donde, tras algunas dudas, lo escondió en el armario, detrás de la ropa colgada. Aquella noche se durmió pensando en que sorprendería a Maggie cuando fuera de visita: se lo ataría a la cintura con la bufanda roja y la convencería de que era suyo e iba a ser soldado. Sólo Maggie era lo bastante tonta como para creérselo, y sólo se atrevía a contárselo a ella. Y Maggie, efectivamente, iría a verlo la semana siguiente, antes de que la enviaran a un internado con su prima Lucy.

Si consideras, lector, que un niño de trece años no debería comportarse de modo tan infantil, debes de ser un hombre muy sabio que, aunque entregado a una vocación civil que exige un aspecto más anodino que

formidable, desde que te creció la barba nunca has posado con actitud marcial y ceñuda ante un espejo. Cabe preguntarse si nuestros soldados seguirían existiendo si no hubiera personas pacíficas que, desde su casa, se imaginan soldados. La guerra, como otros espectáculos dramáticos, tal vez desaparecería si careciera de público.

Capítulo V

La segunda visita de Maggie

La brecha entre los dos chicos tardó en cerrarse y durante un tiempo no se hablaron más de lo necesario. La antipatía natural de sus temperamentos facilitaba el paso del resentimiento al odio y en Philip parecía haber empezado la transición: no era de carácter perverso, pero su susceptibilidad lo hacía propenso a sentir repulsiones intensas. Podríamos aventurarnos a afirmar, basándonos en la autoridad de un gran clásico, que el buey no acostumbra a utilizar los dientes como instrumentos de ataque; y Tom era un muchacho perfectamente bovino que atacaba con ingenuidad bovina; pero había herido a Philip en su punto más débil y le había causado un daño tan agudo como si hubiera estudiado el medio con la mayor precisión y la maldad más venenosa. Tom no veía motivo para que no superaran esa pelea como tantas otras, comportándose como si no hubiera sucedido nada; porque, aunque nunca le había dicho que su padre fuera un granuja, esa idea había estado tan presente en la relación con su turbio compañero de estudios —el cual no le gustaba ni disgustaba— que su expresión en palabras no marcaba ningún hito para él. Y, además, tenía derecho a decirlo, ya que Philip lo había ofendido e insultado. No obstante, al ver que sus avances hacia la concordia no obtenían respuesta, adoptó de nuevo una actitud menos favorable hacia Philip y decidió no volverle a pedir ayuda para dibujar o realizar los ejercicios. Se comportaban con la corrección necesaria para que el señor Stelling, que habría aplastado enérgicamente esas tonterías, no advirtiera su enemistad.

Cuando llegó Maggie, sin embargo, ésta no pudo dejar de examinar con gran interés al nuevo compañero de estudios, aunque fuera el hijo de Wakem, el malvado abogado que tanto hacía enfadar a su padre. Maggie llegó durante las horas de clase y permaneció sentada mientras Philip estudiaba las lecciones con el señor Stelling. Unas semanas antes, Tom le había escrito que Philip sabía innumerables historias —pero no historias tontas, como ella— y, tras observarlo, se convenció de que tenía que ser un chico muy listo: esperaba que, cuando tuvieran oportunidad de hablarse, él también considerara que ella era lista. Además, Maggie sentía cierta ternura por las cosas deformes; prefería los corderitos con el cuello torcido porque le parecía que a los fuertes y bien hechos no les importaban las caricias, y le gustaba mimar a quienes apreciaban sus atenciones. Quería mucho a Tom, pero con frecuencia deseaba que valorara más su cariño.

—Creo que Philip Wakem parece un chico agradable, Tom —comentó cuando salieron juntos del estudio al jardín mientras esperaban la comida—. Él no ha escogido a su padre, ¿sabes? Y he leído casos de hombres muy malos que tuvieron hijos buenos y de padres buenos que tuvieron hijos malos. Y si Philip es bueno, creo que deberíamos compadecernos más todavía de él porque su padre no sea bueno. A ti te gusta, ¿no?

—Uf, es un chico raro —respondió Tom bruscamente—. Y está muy enfadado conmigo porque le dije que su padre era un granuja. Y yo tenía toda la razón al decírselo, porque es verdad; además, empezó él insultándome. Oye, ¿puedes quedarte aquí un momento, Maggie? Tengo algo que hacer arriba.

—¿Y no puedo subir? —preguntó Maggie, que en el primer día de reencuentro con Tom no quería separarse ni de su sombra.

—No, ya te lo contaré todo más tarde, pero ahora no —dijo Tom, alejándose a toda prisa.

Después de comer los chicos se dedicaron a sus libros en el estudio y prepararon las lecciones del día siguiente para tener libre el resto de la tarde en honor a la llegada de Maggie. Tom, inclinado sobre su gramática latina, movía los labios de modo inaudible, como un católico estricto pero impaciente repitiendo una retahíla de padrenuestros, mientras Philip, en el otro extremo de la sala, se dedicaba a dos volúmenes con una expresión de

diligencia satisfecha que despertó la curiosidad de Maggie: no parecía que estuviera estudiando una lección. Maggie estaba sentada en un escabel, situado en ángulo recto respecto a ambos chicos y los contemplaba alternativamente. En una ocasión, Philip levantó la vista de su libro en dirección a la chimenea y sus ojos se cruzaron con unos ojos negros e interrogantes clavados en él. Pensó que la hermanita de Tulliver parecía una niña agradable, no como su hermano: le habría gustado tener una hermana pequeña. Se preguntó por qué los ojos de Maggie le recordaban esos cuentos de princesas convertidas en animales… Probablemente se debía a que eran ojos llenos de una inteligencia insatisfecha y un insatisfecho e implorante deseo de afecto.

—Oye, Maggie —dijo Tom finalmente, cerrando los libros y apartándolos con la energía y decisión de un maestro en el arte de «terminar el trabajo»—. Ya estoy listo. Ven arriba conmigo.

—¿Para qué? —preguntó Maggie cuando cerraron la puerta a sus espaldas. Recordaba la anterior visita de Tom al piso de arriba y empezaba a sospechar algo—. ¿Vas a gastarme una broma?

—No, no, Maggie —dijo Tom en el tono más persuasivo que pudo—. Es algo que te gustará mucho.

Le pasó un brazo por el cuello y ella le rodeó la cintura con el suyo, y enlazados de este modo subieron las escaleras.

—Maggie: no debes contárselo a nadie —advirtió Tom—: si lo haces, me castigarán con cincuenta líneas.

—¿Está vivo? —preguntó Maggie, pensando que tal vez Tom guardara un hurón a escondidas.

—Oh, no voy a decírtelo —dijo él—. Vete al rincón y tápate la cara mientras lo busco —añadió, mientras cerraba a su espalda la puerta del dormitorio—. Ya te diré cuándo puedes darte la vuelta. No debes gritar.

—Oye, si me asustas, gritaré —anunció Maggie, adoptando un aire muy serio.

—No te asustarás, tonta —insistió Tom—. Tápate la cara y que no se te ocurra mirar a hurtadillas.

—Claro que no miraré a hurtadillas —dijo Maggie con desdén: enterró la cabeza en la almohada como una persona de palabra.

Tom miró a su alrededor con aire receloso mientras se dirigía hacia el armario; entró en el reducido espacio y casi cerró la puerta tras él. Maggie mantuvo la cabeza enterrada sin ayuda de ningún principio, ya que en aquella postura tan propicia a las ensoñaciones no tardó en olvidar dónde estaba y sus pensamientos derivaron hacia aquel pobre chico deforme y tan inteligente, hasta que Tom la llamó:

—¡Mira ahora, Maggie!

Tan sólo una larga reflexión y una estudiada disposición de los efectos podía haber permitido a Tom presentar una imagen tan sorprendente ante Maggie cuando ésta alzó los ojos. Disgustado con el aspecto pacífico de un rostro en el que apenas se insinuaban unas cejas rubísimas sobre unos afables ojos de color gris azulado y unas mejillas redondas y sonrosadas que se negaban a adoptar un aspecto formidable, por mucho que frunciera el ceño delante del espejo (en una ocasión, Philip le había hablado de un hombre con el ceño en forma de herradura, y Tom había intentado conseguirlo por todos los medios), había tenido que apelar al infalible recurso de un trozo de corcho quemado y se había pintado unas cejas negras que se unían satisfactoriamente sobre la nariz, acompañadas de una barbilla emborronada con menor precisión. Se había atado un pañuelo rojo sobre la gorra a modo de turbante y llevaba la bufanda roja cruzada sobre el pecho como una banda: tanto color rojo, sumado al tremendo ceño y la decisión con que sostenía el sable con la punta apoyada en el suelo bastaban para trasmitir una idea aproximada de su fiero y sanguinario talante.

Durante un momento Maggie pareció desconcertada y Tom disfrutó intensamente de aquellos instantes; pero acto seguido la niña se echó a reír con una palmada.

—¡Oh, Tom! Estás igual que Barba Azul en aquella obra de teatro. Parecía evidente que la presencia del sable no le había provocado temor alguno: estaba enfundado. Aquella mente frívola necesitaba un estímulo más poderoso para advertir cosas terribles, y Tom se preparó para dar el golpe maestro. Frunciendo el ceño con más empeño que efecto, desenvainó cuidadosamente el sable y lo extendió hacia Maggie.

—¡Oh, Tom, por favor! ¡No hagas eso! —exclamó Maggie en tono de temor contenido, encogiéndose en el rincón opuesto de la habitación—.

¡Voy a gritar! ¡Te lo aseguro! ¡Ojalá no hubiera subido!

Las comisuras de los labios de Tom mostraron cierta tendencia a una sonrisa de satisfacción que éste contuvo de inmediato por impropia de la severidad de un gran soldado. Dejó la vaina en el suelo lentamente, para que no hiciera demasiado ruido:

—¡Soy el duque de Wellington! ¡Marchen! —anunció con aire muy serio mientras daba un paso al frente con la pierna derecha un poco flexionada, sin dejar de apuntar a Maggie con el sable. Ésta, temblorosa y con los ojos llenos de lágrimas, subió a la cama como último recurso para ensanchar el espacio que los separaba.

Tom, feliz por ejecutar su representación militar en público, aunque éste sólo estuviera integrado por Maggie, aplicó todas sus fuerzas a una demostración de cómo asestaba tajos y mandobles, tal como sin duda era de esperar en el duque de Wellington.

—¡Tom: no quiero verlo! ¡Voy a gritar! —exclamó Maggie en cuanto se movió el sable—. ¡Vas hacerte daño! ¡Te vas a cortar la cabeza!

—Uno, dos —dijo Tom con decisión, aunque en el «do» le temblaba ya un poco el pulso—. Tres —dijo ya más lentamente, y entonces el sable describió un giro hacia el suelo. Maggie soltó un grito agudo. El sable había caído con el filo sobre el pie de Tom: a los pocos instantes, Tom también caía. Maggie saltó de la cama sin dejar de gritar e inmediatamente se oyó el rumor de pasos presurosos hacia la habitación. El señor Stelling, procedente de su estudio, situado en aquel mismo piso, fue el primero en entrar. Encontró a los dos niños en el suelo. Tom se había desmayado y Maggie lo sacudía sujetándolo por la solapa de la chaqueta, gritando, con los ojos despavoridos. ¡La pobrecita creía que había muerto y lo sacudía como si con ello pudiera resucitarlo! Al minuto siguiente sollozaba de alegría porque Tom había abierto los ojos: todavía no le entristecía que se hubiera herido en el pie, tan feliz se sentía de que estuviera vivo.

Capítulo VI

Una escena de amor

El pobre Tom soportó el agudo dolor con heroísmo y se mantuvo firme en la decisión de no «chivars» del señor Poulter más de lo imprescindible: la existencia de la moneda de cinco chelines permaneció en secreto, incluso para Maggie. Sin embargo, lo atenazaba un temor terrible —tan terrible que ni siquiera se atrevía a formular la pregunta que podría obtener un «s» fatal — y no osó preguntar al médico ni al señor Stelling: «Señor, ¿voy a quedarme cojo?». Se dominó para no llorar de dolor, pero después de que le curaran el pie y lo dejaran solo con Maggie, sentada a la cabecera de la cama, los niños lloraron juntos con las cabezas recostadas sobre la misma almohada. Tom se veía caminando con muletas, como el hijo del carretero, y Maggie, que no tenía la menor idea de lo que pensaba su hermano, lloraba de verlo llorar. Ni al médico ni al señor Stelling se les había ocurrido prever el temor de Tom y tranquilizarlo con palabras de esperanza. En cambio, Philip vio salir al médico de la casa y abordó al señor Stelling para formularle la misma pregunta que Tom no se había atrevido a hacer.

—Disculpe, señor, ¿el doctor Askern ha dicho que Tulliver se quedaría cojo?

—¡Oh, claro que no! —contestó el señor Stelling—. Sólo cojeará una temporada.

—¿Y cree que se lo ha dicho a Tulliver?

—No, no se le ha comunicado nada sobre esta cuestión.

—Entonces, ¿puedo ir a decírselo?

—Sí, naturalmente: ahora que lo menciona, imagino que puede estar inquieto por ello. Vaya a su dormitorio, pero no haga ruido.

En cuanto se enteró del accidente, la primera idea de Philip fue: «¿Tulliver se quedará cojo? Sería terrible para é», y este sentimiento de compasión enjuagó los agravios de Tom, que todavía no había olvidado. Philip sintió que ya no se repelían, sino que se veían arrastrados hacia una corriente compartida de sufrimiento y triste privación. Su imaginación no se concentraba en la calamidad externa ni en el efecto que tendría en la vida de Tom, sino que ilustraba con nitidez el probable estado de ánimo de Tom: sólo había vivido catorce años, pero casi todos ellos los había pasado sumido en la sensación de que cargaba con un destino irremediablemente penoso.

—El doctor Askern dice que pronto estarás bien, Tulliver, ¿lo sabías? —anunció con cierta timidez cuando se acercó amablemente a la cama de Tom —. Acabo de preguntárselo al señor Stelling y dice que dentro de poco andarás como siempre.

Tom alzó la vista conteniendo el aliento, como sucede cuando nos llega una alegría repentina; después exhaló un largo suspiro y volvió los ojos de color azul grisáceo para mirar francamente a Philip a la cara, cosa que no había hecho durante la última quincena, por lo menos. En cuanto a Maggie, se inquietó entonces por una posibilidad que, hasta el momento, ni le había pasado por la cabeza: la mera idea de que Tom quedara cojo para siempre se impuso sobre la certeza de que tal desgracia probablemente no ocurriría; y se agarró a él y se echó a llorar de nuevo.

—No seas boba, Maggie —dijo Tom tiernamente, sintiéndose ahora muy valiente—. Pronto estaré bien.

—Adiós, Tulliver —dijo Philip, tendiéndole una mano pequeña y delicada que Tom asió de inmediato con sus recios dedos.

—Oye —dijo Tom—: pídele al señor Stelling que te deje venir algunas veces hasta que pueda levantarme, Wakem; así me contarás historias de Robert Bruce.

A partir de entonces, Philip pasó todo su tiempo libre con Tom y Maggie. A Tom le gustaban las historias de peleas tanto como antes, pero insistía con firmeza en el hecho de que aquellos grandes guerreros que

llevaban a cabo tantas cosas maravillosas y salían ilesos iban vestidos de pies a cabeza con excelentes armaduras que, en su opinión, hacían de la pelea tarea sencilla. No se hubiera hecho daño en el pie de haber llevado un zapato de hierro. Tom escuchó con gran interés una nueva historia de Philip sobre un hombre que había sufrido una grave herida en el pie y lloraba de dolor de modo tan desaforado que sus amigos no pudieron soportarlo por más tiempo y lo abandonaron en una isla desierta sin otra ayuda que unas flechas envenenadas para que cazara animales con que alimentarse.

—Yo no grité de dolor —proclamó Tom—, y estoy seguro de que tenía el pie tan mal como él. Gritar de dolor es de cobardes.

Pero Maggie sostuvo que cuando uno sentía un gran dolor podía llorar y si los demás se negaban a soportarlo se comportaban con crueldad. Quiso saber si Filoctetes tenía alguna hermana y por qué no había ido con él a la isla desierta para cuidarlo.

Un día, poco después de que Philip les contara esta historia, éste y Maggie se encontraban solos en el estudio mientras cambiaban a Tom el vendaje del pie. Philip se dedicaba a sus libros y Maggie, tras pasear ociosa por la habitación, sin pretender hacer nada en particular porque no tardaría en subir a ver a Tom, se acercó y se inclinó sobre la mesa, junto a Philip, para ver lo que hacía, porque eran ya buenos amigos y se sentían a gusto el uno con el otro.

—¿Qué estás leyendo en griego? —preguntó Maggie—. Es poesía: me doy cuenta porque los renglones son muy cortos.

—Leo sobre Filoctetes, el cojo del que os hablé ayer —contestó, apoyando la cabeza en la mano y mirándola, como si no le importara en absoluto la interrupción. Maggie permaneció inclinada hacia delante, apoyada en los brazos y moviendo los pies mientras sus ojos negros se perdían en el vacío, olvidando la presencia de Philip y su libro.

—Maggie —dijo Philip al cabo de un par de minutos, apoyado todavía en el codo y mirándola—: si tuvieras un hermano como yo, ¿te parece que lo querrías tanto como a Tom?

Maggie se sobresaltó un poco al ver interrumpidas sus ensoñaciones.

—¿Qué?

Philip repitió la pregunta.

—Oh, sí: todavía más —respondió inmediatamente—. No, más no, porque no creo que pudiera quererte más que a Tom. Pero te compadecería mucho, muchísimo.

Philip se sonrojó: en su pregunta estaba implícita la duda de si lo querría a pesar de su deformidad y cuando Maggie aludió a ella con tanta franqueza, se sintió herido por su compasión. A pesar de su edad, Maggie advirtió el error. Hasta el momento se había comportado instintivamente como si no viera la deformidad de Philip: su aguda sensibilidad y la experiencia adquirida soportando las críticas familiares habían bastado para enseñárselo, como si hubiera recibido la más refinada educación.

—Philip, pero tú eres muy listo, y sabes tocar el piano y cantar —añadió rápidamente—. Me gustaría que fueras hermano mío: me gustas mucho, y te quedarías en casa conmigo cuando Tom se fuera, y me enseñarías todo lo que sabes, ¿verdad? Griego y todo eso.

—Pero te irás y pronto te mandarán al colegio, Maggie —dijo Philip—. Y te olvidarás de mí y no te interesarás por mí nunca más. Y cuando te vea de mayor ni siquiera me saludarás.

—Oh, no. No te olvidaré, estoy segura —dijo Maggie, negando con la cabeza muy seria—. Nunca se me olvida nada, y pienso en los demás cuando no están conmigo. Pienso en el pobre Yap, que tiene un bulto en la garganta y Luke dice que se va a morir. Pero no se lo cuento a Tom porque se inquietaría muchísimo. No conoces a Yap: es un perrito muy raro y sólo Tom y yo lo queremos.

—¿Me querrías tanto a mi como a Yap, Maggie? —preguntó Philip con una sonrisa triste.

—Claro que sí —contestó Maggie con una carcajada.

Yo te aprecio mucho, Maggie; nunca te olvidaré —dijo Philip—. Y cuando me sienta desgraciado, pensaré siempre en ti y desearé tener una hermana con unos ojos negros como los tuyos.

—¿Por qué te gustan mis ojos? —preguntó Maggie complacida. Sólo su padre hablaba de sus ojos como si tuvieran un mérito especial.

—No lo sé —contestó Philip—. No son como los demás. Parece como si quisieran hablar, como si quisieran decir cosas agradables. No me gusta

que los demás me miren demasiado, pero me gusta que tú me mires. Maggie.

—Vaya, parece que me quieres más que Tom —dijo Maggie con cierta tristeza. Después, preguntándose cómo podía convencer a Philip de que lo apreciaba aunque fuera jorobado, dijo:

—¿Quieres que te dé un beso, como se los doy a Tom? Si quieres, te lo daré.

—Sí, me gustaría mucho: nadie me da besos.

Maggie le pasó un brazo alrededor del cuello y lo besó de todo corazón.

—Ya está. Y siempre te recordaré y te daré un beso cuando te vuelva a ver, aunque pase muchísimo tiempo. Pero ahora tengo que irme porque me parece que el doctor Askern ha terminado con el pie de Tom.

Cuando su padre fue a buscarla, Maggie le dijo:

—Oh, padre: Philip Wakem es tan bueno con Tom… es un chico muy listo y lo quiero mucho. Y Tom también lo quiere, ¿verdad? Di que lo quieres —añadió suplicante.

Tom se sonrojó un poco al mirar a su padre.

—No seré amigo suyo cuando me vaya de aquí, padre; pero hemos hecho las paces, porque he tenido daño en el pie y me ha enseñado a jugar a las damas, y ahora soy capaz de ganarlo.

—Bueno, bueno —dijo el señor Tulliver—. Si se porta bien contigo, intenta desagraviarlo y sé bueno con él. Es una pobre criatura cheposa y ha salido a su difunta madre. Pero no te hagas muy amigo de él: también lleva la sangre de su padre, y de tal palo, tal astilla.

Los caracteres opuestos de ambos chicos provocaron lo que no habría conseguido una simple reprobación del señor Tulliver: a pesar de la nueva amabilidad de Philip y del correspondiente agradecimiento de Tom en sus malos momentos, nunca fueron muy amigos. Cuando Maggie se fue y cuando Tom, poco a poco, empezó a caminar como siempre, la amistosa calidez que habían despertado la compasión y la gratitud fue muriendo y regresaron a su antigua relación. Philip se mostraba con frecuencia malhumorado y despectivo: y las impresiones amables y concretas de Tom fueron fundiéndose en el antiguo clima de recelo y desagrado hacia aquel chico raro, jorobado e hijo de un granuja. Para que los hombres y los chicos

se unan gracias al calor de sentimientos efímeros deben estar hechos de metales que puedan alearse: de no ser así, se separarán en cuanto el calor cese.

Capítulo VII

Se cierran las puertas doradas del paraíso

De manera que Tom siguió en King's Lorton hasta el quinto semestre —hasta cumplir dieciséis años— mientras Maggie crecía, con una rapidez que sus tías consideraban altamente reprensible, en el internado de la señorita Firniss, situado en la antigua población de Laceham on the Floss, en compañía de la prima Lucy. En las primeras cartas a Tom enviaba siempre recuerdos a Philip y hacía muchas preguntas sobre él que recibían como respuesta breves frases sobre el dolor de muelas de Tom, explicaciones sobre la casita de hierba que estaba ayudando a construir en el jardín y asuntos de índole similar. Se apenó al oír a Tom decir en vacaciones que Philip volvía a ser tan raro como siempre y estaba de malhumor con frecuencia: advirtió que ya no eran muy amigos y cuando recordó a Tom que debería querer siempre a Philip por ser tan bueno con él cuando tuvo el pie enfermo, éste contestó:

—Bien, no tengo la culpa: yo no le hago nada malo.

Maggie apenas volvió a ver a Philip durante el resto de su vida escolar: en las vacaciones de verano él iba siempre a la playa y en Navidades sólo se veían algunas veces en las calles de Saint Ogg's. Cuando se encontraban, ella recordaba la promesa de saludarlo con un beso pero, como señorita interna en un colegio, ahora sabía que tal saludo era totalmente improcedente y Philip tampoco lo esperaba. La promesa era nula, como tantas otras dulces e ilusorias promesas de nuestra infancia; nula como las promesas hechas en el Edén antes de que se dividieran las estaciones,

cuando las flores crecían al mismo tiempo que los frutos, e imposible de llevar a cabo una vez cruzadas las puertas doradas del paraíso.

Pero cuando su padre se embarcó finalmente en el pleito con que llevaba tantos años amenazando, y Wakem, como agente al mismo tiempo de Pivart y de Pero Botero, actuó contra él, incluso Maggie sintió, con cierta tristeza, que probablemente no volvería a tener ninguna intimidad con Philip: el mero nombre de Wakem hacía enfadar a su padre y en una ocasión le oyó decir que si su hijo jorobado vivía hasta heredar las fraudulentas ganancias de su padre, caería sobre él una maldición.

—Trata con él tan poco como puedas, hijo mío dijo a Tom; y éste obedeció la orden fácilmente, pues el señor Stelling, en aquella época, tenía otros dos pupilos en casa; porque si bien el ascenso social de ese caballero no había sido tan meteórico como los admiradores de su improvisada elocuencia esperaban de un predicador cuya voz exigía tan amplia esfera, sin embargo su prosperidad crecía lo bastante como para permitirle ir aumentando los gastos en continua desproporción con sus ingresos.

En cuanto al curso escolar de Tom, éste seguía con la monotonía propia de un molino y su mente continuaba moviéndose con un pulso lento y apagado en un medio de ideas poco interesantes o ininteligibles. Con todo, en cuanto llegaban las vacaciones llevaba a su casa dibujos cada vez más grandes con satinadas reproducciones paisajísticas y acuarelas de vívidos verdes, junto con libros manuscritos llenos de ejercicios y problemas realizados con excelente caligrafía, ya que ponía en ella toda la atención. Llevaba también uno o dos libros nuevos que indicaban su recorrido por los distintos períodos de la historia, la doctrina cristiana y la literatura latina, y de su paso había sacado algún provecho más que la mera posesión de los libros. El oído y la lengua de Tom se habían acostumbrado a muchas palabras y frases que se consideran propias de una condición educada y, aunque nunca se había dedicado a fondo a una lección, éstas habían dejado en él un poso de nociones vagas, fragmentarias e inútiles. El señor Tulliver advertía algunas señales de estas adquisiciones y pensaba que la educación de Tom iba bien: y aunque observó que no había mapas ni tampoco muchas sumas no se quejó formalmente al señor Stelling. Eso de los estudios era

una cosa desconcertante; además, si sacaba a Tom de allí, tampoco conocía otra escuela mejor donde enviarlo.

Para cuando Tom se encontraba ya en el último trimestre en King's Lorton, los años habían operado cambios sorprendentes en él desde el día en que lo vimos regresar de la academia del señor Jacobs. Ahora era un joven alto que se desenvolvía con soltura y hablaba sin más timidez que la necesaria como síntoma adecuado de una mezcla de reserva y orgullo; llevaba levita y camisas de cuello alto y contemplaba con impaciencia el bozo que le crecía sobre el labio superior mientras examinaba a diario la navaja de afeitar virgen, comprada en las últimas vacaciones. Philip se había marchado ya —en el trimestre de otoño— para pasar el invierno en el Sur, atento a su salud; y este cambio contribuyó al ánimo inquieto y jubiloso que por lo general acompaña a los últimos meses previos al fin del colegio. También se esperaba que en ese trimestre se fallara el pleito de su padre: eso hacía que la perspectiva de regresar a casa fuera todavía más atractiva. A Tom, cuyo punto de vista se derivaba de las conversaciones con su padre, no le cabía la menor duda de que Pivart saldría derrotado.

Hacía ya varias semana que Tom no tenía noticias de su casa —hecho que no le sorprendía, porque su padre y su madre no eran propensos a manifestar su afecto en cartas innecesarias— cuando, para su sorpresa, una mañana de un día frío y duro hacia finales del mes de noviembre, le comunicaron, poco después de que entrara en el estudio a las nueve, que su hermana lo aguardaba. La señora Stelling fue al estudio para anunciarlo y lo acompañó al salón, donde Tom entró solo.

Maggie también había crecido y llevaba el cabello trenzado y enroscado en un moño: era casi tan alta como Tom, aunque sólo tenía trece años, y en aquel momento parecía mayor que él. Se había quitado la capota y desprendido las trenzas de la frente, como si no pudiera soportar esa carga, y volvía los ojos hacia la puerta con inquietud y expresión agotada en su joven rostro. Cuando entró Tom, no dijo nada, sino que se dirigió hacia él, lo rodeó con los brazos y le dio un beso con todo su corazón. Tom estaba acostumbrado a sus diversos estados de ánimo y no se alarmó ante aquel saludo inusualmente serio.

—Vaya, ¿cómo es que has venido tan temprano en una mañana tan fría, Maggie? ¿Has venido en la calesa?

—No, he tomado un coche de punto y después he venido caminando desde el puesto de peaje.

—Pero ¿cómo es que no estás en el colegio? Todavía no han empezado las vacaciones.

—Padre me hizo llamar —contestó Maggie con un ligero temblor en los labios—. Fui a casa hace tres o cuatro días.

—¿Padre se encuentra mal? —preguntó Tom inquieto.

—No exactamente. Se siente muy desgraciado, Tom. Ha terminado el pleito y he venido a decírtelo porque me pareció que sería mejor que lo supieras antes de que llegaras a casa, y no me gustaba la idea de enviarte una carta.

—Padre no habrá perdido el pleito, ¿verdad? —preguntó Tom rápidamente, levantándose del sofá de un brinco y plantándose delante de Maggie con las manos repentinamente hundidas en los bolsillos.

—Sí, querido Tom —contestó Maggie, temblorosa, alzando los ojos hasta él.

Tom permaneció en silencio un par de minutos con los ojos clavados en el suelo.

—Padre tendrá que pagar mucho dinero, ¿no? —dijo.

—Sí —contestó Maggie con voz débil.

—Bueno, es inevitable —dijo Tom con voz valiente, sin hacerse una idea tangible de lo que suponía la pérdida de una gran cantidad de dinero—. Pero no estará muy enfadado, ¿no? —añadió, mirando a Maggie y pensando que su rostro agitado se debía a la manera que tenían las niñas de encajar los golpes.

—Sí —contestó Maggie de nuevo con voz débil y a continuación, empujada a hablar por la calma de Tom, añadió con voz fuerte y rápida, como si se le escaparan las palabras—: Tom, perderá el molino y la tierra, todo. No le quedará nada.

Los ojos de Tom lanzaron un destello de sorpresa antes de que el muchacho palideciera y se echara a temblar. No dijo nada; se limitó a sentarse en el sofá de nuevo y a mirar por la ventana con aire ausente.

Tom nunca se había inquietado por el futuro. Su padre siempre montó un buen caballo, tuvo una buena casa y el aire alegre y seguro de un hombre respaldado por sus propiedades. A Tom ni le había pasado por la cabeza que su padre pudiera «fracasa». el fracaso era un tipo de infortunio del que siempre había oído hablar como una gran deshonra, y no podía asociar la idea de deshonra con ninguno de sus conocidos y menos todavía con su padre. La orgullosa conciencia de la respetabilidad familiar formaba parte del mismo aire que Tom respiraba desde que nació. Sabía que había gente en Saint Ogg's que vivía de modo ostentoso sin poseer dinero que respaldara su actitud, y siempre había oído hablar de esas gentes con desprecio y reprobación: estaba firmemente convencido, con una fe de toda la vida que no necesitaba pruebas para sustentarse, de que su padre Podía gastar mucho dinero si quería; y puesto que su educación en casa del señor Stelling le había hecho ver la vida desde un punto de vista más dispendioso, había pensado con frecuencia que cuando creciera se convertiría en un personaje destacado, dueño de perros y un caballo, una silla de montar y otros aditamentos propios de un joven caballero, y parecería igual que cualquier otro de sus contemporáneos de Saint Ogg's que tal vez creían ocupar un puesto más elevado en la sociedad porque sus padres tenían profesiones liberales o poseían grandes molinos de aceite. En cuanto a los pronósticos y los gestos de censura de sus tíos y tías, sólo habían conseguido hacerle pensar que eran personas muy desagradables: en todo lo que alcanzaba su memoria, no habían parado de lanzar críticas. Su padre era más listo que todos ellos.

Por fin el vello había crecido sobre el labio superior de Tom y, sin embargo, sus pensamientos esperanzas habían sido hasta el momento una reproducción, apenas cambiada en la forma, de los sueños infantiles de unos años atrás. En aquel momento despertaba con un brusco golpe.

Maggie se había asustado ante el pálido y tembloroso silencio de Tom. Tenía que decirle algo más, algo peor le lanzó los brazos al cuello y dijo entre sollozos:

—Oh, querido Tom, no te inquietes tanto. Intenta sobrellevarlo.

Tom ofreció la mejilla para recibir pasivamente sus besos implorantes; se le humedecieron los ojos y se los secó con la mano. Este gesto pareció

despertarlo.

—¿Tengo que ir a casa contigo, Maggie? —preguntó dando un respingo —. ¿Dijo padre que fuera?

—No, Tom. Padre no quería —contestó Maggie. La inquietud que sentía por los sentimientos de Tom la ayudaba a controlar su agitación: ¿qué haría cuando se lo contara todo?—. Pero madre quiere que vengas. Pobre madre: no para de llorar. Tom, en casa la situación es terrible.

Los labios de Maggie palidecieron todavía más y se echó a temblar tanto como Tom. Las dos criaturas se abrazaron, temblorosas; una de ellas debido a un temor incierto, la otra ante la imagen de una terrible certeza. Maggie habló en apenas un susurro.

—Y… nuestro pobre padre…

Maggie no pudo seguir, pero Tom no podía soportar la tensión. Sus temores habían empezado a imaginar la vaga idea del encarcelamiento por deudas.

—¿Dónde está padre? —preguntó con impaciencia—. Dímelo, Maggie.

—Está en casa —contestó Maggie, respondió Maggie a esta pregunta, mas fácil de responder—. Pero… —añadió tras una pausa— no es el de siempre. Se cayó del caballo… Sólo me reconoce a mí desde entonces… Parece haber perdido la cabeza… padre, padre…

Con estas últimas palabras, los sollozos de Maggie, retenidos durante tanto tiempo, estallaron con mayor violencia. Tom sentía esa presión del corazón que prohibe las lágrimas: no tenía una visión de sus problemas familiares tan clara como Maggie, que había estado en casa; sólo sentía el peso aplastante de lo que parecía una desgracia absoluta. Estrechó a Maggie de modo casi convulsivo, pero su rostro permaneció rígido y sin lágrimas —los ojos inexpresivos—, como si una cortina de nubes le cerrara el camino de repente.

Maggie, sin embargo, no tardó en dejar de llorar bruscamente: una idea la sobresaltó como una señal de alarma.

—Tenemos que ponernos en camino, Tom. No podemos quedarnos más rato. Padre me echará en falta. Debemos estar en el peaje a las diez para subir al coche —dijo con apresurada decisión, frotándose los ojos *y* poniéndose en pie para recoger la capota.

Tom se puso en pie con el mismo impulso.

—Espera un minuto, Maggie —dijo—. Primero tengo que hablar con el señor Stelling.

Se dirigió al estudio donde estaban los alumnos, pero en el camino se encontró con el señor Stelling. Su esposa le había explicado que Maggie parecía muy preocupada cuando apareció en busca de su hermano y, transcurrido un tiempo prudencial, acudía para interesarse por ellos.

—Señor, tengo que marcharme a casa —dijo Tom bruscamente cuando se encontró al señor Stelling en el pasillo—. Debo volver ahora mismo con mi hermana. Mi padre ha perdido el pleito y todas sus propiedades y se encuentra muy enfermo.

El señor Stelling reaccionó como un hombre bondadoso: aunque preveía que, probablemente, dejaría de ganar algún dinero, esta idea no influyó en sus sentimientos mientras contemplaba con compasión a aquellos hermanos para los que la juventud y la pena llegaban juntos. En cuanto se enteró de cómo había viajado Maggie y lo ansiosa que estaba por regresar a su casa, apresuró su marcha y se limitó a susurrar algo a la señora Stelling, que lo había seguido. Ésta desapareció inmediatamente de la habitación.

Tom y Maggie se encontraban en el umbral, preparados para marcharse, cuando apareció la señora Stelling con una cestita que colgó a Maggie del brazo diciendo:

—No olviden comer algo durante el camino, hijos míos.

De repente, Maggie sintió una oleada de cariño hacia una mujer que nunca le había gustado y le dio un beso sin decir palabra. Así conoció la pobre niña un sentimiento que es el don de la tristeza: la sensibilidad ante los gestos humanitarios que une con lazos de camaradería, de la misma manera que entre los hombres salvajes que viven entre hielos, la mera presencia de un compañero despierta profundos afectos.

El señor Stelling puso la mano sobre el hombro de Tom.

—Dios lo bendiga, hijo. Ya me darán noticias suyas —dijo.

Estrechó la mano de Maggie, pero no se oyó ninguna palabra de despedida. Tom había pensado con mucha frecuencia en lo alegre que estaría el día en que abandonara los estudios «¡para siempre!». En cambio ahora esos años de estudio parecían unas vacaciones que tocaban a su fin.

Las dos menudas figuras juveniles no tardaron en desdibujarse en la lejana carretera y pronto se perdieron detrás de los altos setos.

Se habían adentrado en una nueva vida de tristeza y a partir de ese momento el sol no tendría ya el mismo brillo. Habían entrado en un territorio agreste lleno de espinas y las puertas doradas de la infancia se cerraban tras ellos para siempre.

VOLUMEN II

Libro tercero

La ruina

Capítulo I

Lo que había sucedido en casa

Quienes tuvieron oportunidad de ver al señor Tulliver en el momento en que se enteraba de que había perdido el pleito y que Pivart y Wakem habían triunfado pensaron que, para ser un hombre tan seguro de sí mismo e irascible, encajaba el golpe extraordinariamente bien. Él también lo creyó: decidió demostrar que si Wakem o cualquier otro creían que estaba derrotado, se equivocaban. No podía negarse a ver que las costas de aquel juicio tan prolongado se llevarían más de lo que poseía, pero se creía lleno de recursos que le permitirían defenderse de cualquier tipo de resultado como si fuera tolerable y evitar la apariencia de ruina. Toda la obstinación y rebeldía de su carácter, desviada de su antiguo cauce, encontró una válvula de escape en la elaboración de planes mediante los cuales podría hacer frente a sus dificultades y seguir siendo el señor Tulliver del molino de Dorlcote. Afluyó a su cabeza tal avalancha de proyectos que no resultaba sorprendente que tuviera el rostro encendido cuando salió de su conversación con su abogado, el señor Gore, y montó el caballo para dirigirse a casa desde Lindum. Furley, en cuyas manos estaba la hipoteca sobre las tierras, era un individuo razonable que sin duda, al parecer del señor Tulliver, estaría encantado no sólo de comprar la finca entera, incluido el molino y la casa, sino que aceptaría al señor Tulliver como arrendatario y estaría dispuesto a prestarle dinero, que éste le devolvería con elevados intereses procedentes de los beneficios del negocio mientras se quedaba tan sólo con lo necesario para mantenerse él y su familia.

¿Quién se negaría a tan provechosa inversión? Seguro que Furley no lo hacía, porque el señor Tulliver había decidido que Furley aceptaría sus planes con la mayor presteza; y hay hombres —cuyo cerebro todavía no se ha acalorado peligrosamente por la pérdida de un pleito— capaces de ver en sus propios intereses o deseos motivo suficiente para las acciones de otros hombres. En el pensamiento del molinero no cabía la menor duda de que Furley haría exactamente lo que él deseaba; y, si lo hacía, caramba, no irían tan mal las cosas. El señor Tulliver y su familia vivirían de modo más humilde y modesto, pero sólo hasta que los beneficios del negocio hubieran pagado el adelanto de Furley, y eso sucedería cuando el señor Tulliver tuviera todavía muchos años de vida por delante. Estaba claro que las costas del proceso podían pagarse sin tener que abandonar el lugar donde siempre había vivido ni quedar ante todos como un hombre arruinado. Sin duda, era un momento difícil. Además, estaba la garantía prestada al pobre Riley, que había muerto repentinamente el último mes de abril dejando a su amigo la carga de una deuda de doscientas cincuenta libras: este hecho había contribuido a convertir la lectura navideña del libro de cuentas del señor Tulliver en algo menos agradable de lo que cualquiera desearía. ¡En fin! Nunca había sido de esos miserables que se niegan a ayudar a un compañero de viaje en este mundo enredoso. Lo más irritante de todo era que, unos meses atrás, el acreedor que le había prestado las quinientas libras para que pudiera devolvérselas a la señora Glegg había empezado a ponerse nervioso por su dinero (azuzado por Wakem, sin duda), y el señor Tulliver, todavía convencido de ganar el pleito y considerando poco oportuno reunir esa cantidad hasta la resolución del caso, accedió apresuradamente a firmar una escritura de venta de los muebles de su casa y otros objetos como garantía del préstamo. Daba lo mismo, se había dicho: pronto devolvería el dinero y no era más peligrosa aquella garantía que cualquier otra. Sin embargo, ahora veía las consecuencias de esta escritura de venta bajo otra luz y recordó que no tardaría en llegar el momento en que se ejecutara la venta, a menos que devolviera el dinero. Dos meses antes habría declarado categóricamente que nunca pediría prestado a los parientes de su esposa; pero ahora se decía, de modo igualmente categórico, que era perfectamente justo y natural que Bessy fuera a ver a los Pullet y se lo explicara todo: no

permitirían que se vendieran los muebles de Bessy, y éstos también podrían ser garantía para Pullet, si les prestaba el dinero: al fin y al cabo, no sería un trato de favor. El señor Tulliver nunca pediría nada para sí a un individuo tan pusilánime, pero bien podía hacerlo Bessy si quería.

Los hombres más orgullosos y obstinados son precisamente los más propensos a cambiar de opinión y contradecirse de modo tan súbito como Tulliver: para ellos, cualquier cosa resulta más fácil que enfrentarse al simple hecho de que han sufrido una derrota absoluta y deben empezar de cero. Y habrás advertido, lector, que el señor Tulliver, aunque no era más que un destacado molinero y malteador, era tan orgulloso y terco como si fuera un importante personaje cuyo talante inspirara destacadas tragedias de esas en las que se barre el escenario con regios ropajes y se convierte en sublime al más anodino cronista. El orgullo y la obstinación de los molineros y otras personas insignificantes que se cruzan cada día en nuestro camino también tienen su tragedia, pero ésta es silenciosa, escondida, pasa de generación en generación sin dejar huella: una tragedia, tal vez, como la que se da en los conflictos de las almas jóvenes, hambrientas de alegrías, aplastadas por una carga que súbitamente se torna demasiado pesada, sometidas a la tristeza de un hogar donde las mañanas no traen consigo nuevas promesas y donde el descontento de unos padres cansados, decepcionados y sin esperanzas recae sobre los hijos como una masa de aire densa y húmeda en la que todas las funciones vitales están amortiguadas; o como la tragedia que existe en la muerte lenta o repentina posterior a una pasión herida, aunque sea ésta una muerte sólo digna de un funeral en la parroquia. Para algunos animales, es ley de vida aferrarse a su posición y son incapaces de rehacerse tras un golpe: y para algunos seres humanos, la supremacía es ley de vida y sólo pueden soportar la humillación negándose a verla y, en su opinión, seguir dominando.

El señor Tulliver seguía ocupando un lugar predominante —en su imaginación— mientras se acercaba a Saint Ogg's, que debía atravesar de camino a casa. Pero ¿qué fue lo que le hizo seguir al coche de Laceham hasta la cochera, en cuanto lo vio entrar en la población, para que el encargado escribiera una nota pidiéndole a Maggie que regresara al día siguiente? Al señor Tulliver le temblaba demasiado la mano para escribir y

quería que dieran la carta al cochero para que éste la entregara la mañana siguiente en la escuela de la señorita Firniss. Sentía una imperiosa necesidad, que no quería explicarse siquiera, de tener a Maggie junto a él —sin demora— y, por lo tanto, debía regresar en el coche de punto del siguiente día.

Al llegar a casa, no quiso admitir ante la señora Tulliver que se vieran enfrentados a ninguna dificultad y la regañó por dejarse llevar por la inquietud en cuanto supo que habían perdido el pleito, afirmando, enfadado, que no había motivo alguno para lamentarse. Aquella noche no le dijo nada de la escritura de venta y de la petición a la señora Pullet, porque la había mantenido en la ignorancia sobre la naturaleza de aquella transacción y le había explicado la necesidad de hacer un inventario de los muebles como un asunto relacionado con su testamento. El tener por esposa a una mujer cuyo intelecto es notablemente inferior al de uno tiene, igual que ciertos privilegios, unos pocos inconvenientes, tales como la necesidad de recurrir ocasionalmente a algún pequeño engaño.

Al día siguiente por la tarde, el señor Tulliver montó otra vez a caballo para dirigirse al despacho del señor Gore en Saint Ogg's. Gore tenía la misión de ver al señor Furley por la mañana y sondearlo en relación con los asuntos de Tulliver. Sin embargo, no había recorrido la mitad del camino cuando se encontró con un escribiente del gabinete del señor Gore que le llevaba una carta. Una repentina llamada le impedía atender a Tulliver, tal como habían quedado pero se encontrarían al día siguiente en su oficina a las once y, entre tanto, le enviaba por carta una información importante.

—¡Vaya! Dígale a Gore que lo veré mañana a las once —dijo Tulliver; después tomó la carta y volvió grupas.

El escribiente, sorprendido por los ojos brillantes e inquietos del señor Tulliver, lo miró alejarse durante unos momentos antes de marcharse. La lectura de una carta no era asunto de unos instantes para Tulliver: comprendía muy lentamente el sentido de cada frase, fuera manuscrita o incluso en caracteres impresos; de modo que se metió la carta en el bolsillo con la idea de abrirla cuando estuviera en su casa, sentado en el sillón. Pero al poco se le ocurrió que tal vez contuviera algo que la señora Tulliver no debiera saber, por lo que sería más seguro que no la viera siquiera. Detuvo

el caballo, sacó la carta y la leyó. Era breve: venía a decir que el señor Gore sabía de buena fuente, aunque secreta, que Furley había necesitado dinero últimamente y se había desprendido de algunos bienes, entre los que se contaba la hipoteca que pesaba sobre la propiedad del señor Tulliver, que había ido a parar a manos de Wakem.

Media hora más tarde, el carretero del propio señor Tulliver lo encontró inconsciente, tendido junto al camino, junto a una carta abierta y a su caballo gris, que lo olfateaba inquieto.

Cuando Maggie llegó a su casa aquella noche, obedeciendo a la llamada de su padre, éste ya no se encontraba inconsciente. Una hora antes había vuelto en sí y, tras una mirada vaga y ausente, murmuró algo sobre «una cart» e insistió en reclamarla. A instancias del señor Turnbull, el médico, sacaron el mensaje de Gore y lo depositaron sobre la cama, lo que pareció aplacar la impaciencia de Tulliver. El enfermo se quedó con los ojos fijos en la carta, como si ésta pudiera ayudarlo a hilvanar sus pensamientos Sin embargo, una nueva oleada de recuerdos pareció llegar y barrer los anteriores: apartó los ojos del papel para fijarlos en la puerta y, tras mirarla inquieto, como si se esforzara por ver algo que sus ojos no alcanzaban a distinguir, dijo:

—La mocita…

De vez en cuando repetía la palabra con impaciencia, aparentemente ajeno a todo lo que no fuera ese imperioso deseo, sin dar muestras de reconocer a nadie, ni siquiera a su esposa, y la pobre señora Tulliver, cuyas escasas facultades estaban casi paralizadas por aquella repentina acumulación de problemas, se acercaba una y otra vez a la puerta de la verja para ver si llegaba el coche de Laceham, aunque todavía no era la hora.

Al final llegó el coche y depositó a la inquieta muchacha, que sólo era una niña en el cariñoso recuerdo de su padre.

—Madre, ¿qué sucede? —preguntó Maggie con los labios pálidos cuando su madre se acercó hasta ella llorando. No sospechaba que su padre estuviera enfermo, ya que él mismo había dictado la carta en la oficina de Saint Ogg’s.

Pero el doctor Turnbull salió a recibirla: los médicos son los ángeles buenos de las casas con dificultades, y Maggie corrió hacia aquel amable y

viejo amigo, del que guardaba los más antiguos recuerdos, con una mirada trémula e interrogante.

—No te alarmes en exceso, hija —dijo, tomándola de la mano—. Tu padre ha sufrido un ataque repentino y todavía no ha recuperado la memoria. Pero ha estado preguntando por ti y le hará mucho bien verte: haz el menor ruido posible, quítate las prendas de abrigo y sube conmigo.

Maggie obedeció con ese terrible latido del corazón que hace que la existencia parezca una mera pulsación dolorosa. La voz queda del doctor Turnbull había alarmado su sensible imaginación. Los ojos de su padre seguían mirando hacia la puerta con inquietud cuando ella entró y se enfrentó a aquella mirada extraña, ansiosa e indefensa que había estado buscándola en vano. Con un movimiento repentino, Tulliver se incorporó Y Maggie corrió hacia él, lo abrazó y lo besó con angustia.

¡Pobre criatura! Era muy pronto para que conociera uno de los momentos decisivos de la existencia, cuando todo aquello que hemos deseado o disfrutado, todo lo que podemos temer o soportar se torna insignificante a nuestros ojos y se pierde, como un recuerdo trivial, frente al amor sencillo y primitivo que nos ata a nuestros seres más cercanos cuando éstos atraviesan momentos de angustia o desamparo.

El destello de reconocimiento había sido excesivo para la capacidad del padre enfermo y débil, que cayó de nuevo en un estado de inconsciencia y rigidez que duró varias horas; sólo se interrumpió de vez en cuando con breves momentos de lucidez durante los que tomó pasivamente todo lo que le dieron con una especie de satisfacción infantil por hallarse cerca de Maggie… Satisfacción semejante a la que sentiría un nene al regresar al regazo de su niñera.

La señora Tulliver mandó llamar a sus hermanas y en el piso de abajo hubo lamentos y alharacas: tanto los tíos como las tías comprobaron que la ruina de Bessy y de su familia era tan absoluta como siempre habían predicho, y la familia coincidió en la idea de que Tulliver había sufrido un castigo divino y sería poco piadoso intentar contrarrestarlo con excesivas muestras de amabilidad. Pero Maggie casi no oyó nada de eso, ya que apenas abandonó el dormitorio de su padre, donde permanecía sentada frente a él, dándole la mano. La señora Tulliver quería que fueran a buscar a

Tom y parecía pensar más en el chico que en su esposo; pero las tías y los tíos se opusieron: puesto que el doctor Turnbull decía que, en su opinión, no había peligro inminente, Tom estaba mejor con su maestro. Sin embargo, al final del segundo día, cuando Maggie se había ido acostumbrando a los estados temporales de inconsciencia de su padre y a la esperanza de que los superara, ella misma empezó a desear intensamente el regreso de Tom.

—¡Mi pobre muchacho…! Debería volver a casa… —Lloró su madre por la noche.

—Madre, deje que vaya a buscarlo y se lo cuente todo —dijo Maggie —: iré mañana por la mañana si padre no me llama ni me reconoce. Sería horrible para Tom volver a casa sin saber nada.

Ya la mañana siguiente, Maggie se fue, tal como hemos visto. Sentados en el coche de regreso a su casa, los hermanos hablaban en tristes susurros esporádicos.

—Dicen que el señor Wakem se ha quedado con la hipoteca o algo parecido sobre la tierra, Tom —dijo Maggie—. Creen que lo que provocó el ataque de padre fue la carta con la noticia.

—Estoy seguro de que ese sinvergüenza ha estado planeándolo todo para arruinar a padre —afirmó Tom, dando un salto desde una sucesión de vagas impresiones a una conclusión definitiva—. Cuando sea mayor haré que se arrepienta. Ni se te ocurra volver a dirigir la palabra a Philip.

—¡Oh, Tom! —exclamó Maggie, con tono de triste reproche; pero no tenía ánimos para discutir y menos aún de irritar a Tom llevándole la contraria.

Capítulo II

Los terafines[20] de la señora Tulliver o las divinidades del hogar

Cuando el carruaje depositó a Tom y a Maggie, hacía ya cinco horas que ésta había salido de su casa y estaba inquieta ante la posibilidad de que su padre la hubiera echado de menos y hubiera preguntado en vano «dónde estaba la mocit». No se le ocurría que hubiera podido tener lugar otro cambio. Corrió por el sendero de gravilla y entró en la casa antes que Tom, pero en el umbral se sorprendió al percibir un fuerte olor a tabaco. La puerta del salón estaba entreabierta y de ahí salía el olor. Aquello era muy raro: ¿qué visita podría ponerse a fumar en un momento como aquél? ¿Estaba allí su madre? En ese caso, debía comunicársele la llegada de Tom. Tras la pausa debida a la sorpresa, Maggie estaba abriendo la puerta cuando llegó Tom y ambos miraron juntos hacia el salón. Allí se encontraba un hombre tosco y sucio cuyo rostro Tom recordaba vagamente, sentado en el sillón de su padre, fumando, junto a una jarra y un vaso.

Tom adivinó en el acto la verdad. Había oído con frecuencia, incluso de pequeño, frases como «tener el alguacil en cas» y «liquidar los bienes para pagar a los acreedore»… formaban parte de la vergüenza y la desgracia del «fracas», de quedarse sin dinero y arruinarse, de caer en la condición de los pobres trabajadores manuales. Parecía lógico que eso sucediera, puesto que su padre había perdido sus propiedades, y pensó que la única causa de aquella desgracia era la pérdida del pleito. Pero la presencia inmediata de aquella forma de deshonra era para Tom una experiencia mucho más

intensa que el peor de los temores, como si los problemas verdaderos no hubieran hecho más que empezar: no es lo mismo el dolor espontáneo en un nervio que el estímulo directo sobre éste.

—¿Cómo está usted, señor? —saludó el hombre, quitándose la pipa de la boca con un tosco gesto de cortesía. Aquellos rostros juveniles sorprendidos hacían que se sintiera un poco incómodo.

Pero Tom se dio media vuelta rápidamente, sin decir nada: le resultaba odioso verlo. En cambio, Maggie no entendió qué hacía ahí el desconocido y siguió a Tom.

—¿Quién puede ser, Tom? ¿Qué pasa? —susurró.

Entonces, con un indefinido temor a que el desconocido tuviera algo que ver con un posible cambio en la salud de su padre, corrió escaleras arriba, se detuvo un instante a la puerta del dormitorio para quitarse la capota a toda prisa y entró de puntillas. Todo estaba en silencio: su padre se encontraba acostado, inconsciente de lo que lo rodeaba, con los ojos cerrados, igual que cuando se había ido. Le hacía compañía una criada, pero su madre no estaba.

—¿Dónde está mi madre? —preguntó. La criada no lo sabía. Maggie salió rápidamente y dijo a Tom:

—Padre está acostado y tranquilo: vamos a buscar a madre; no sé dónde está.

La señora Tulliver no se encontraba en la planta baja ni en ninguno de los dormitorios. Bajo el desván, a Maggie sólo quedaba una habitación sin registrar: el ropero donde su madre guardaba su ropa blanca y todos los objetos «mejore» que sólo se desempaquetaban y se sacaban en ocasiones especiales. Cuando regresaban por el pasillo, Tom, que iba delante de Maggie, abrió la puerta de esa habitación y exclamó al instante:

—¡Madre!

La señora Tulliver estaba sentada allí, rodeada de sus guardados tesoros. Uno de los arcones estaba abierto: la tetera de plata ya no estaba envuelta en capas y capas de papel y la mejor porcelana descansaba sobre un arcón cerrado; en los estantes había cucharas, broquetas y cucharones dispuestos en hileras; y la pobre mujer agitaba la cabeza y lloraba con los labios tensos

en una mueca amarga, mientras contemplaba su nombre, Elizabeth Dodson, bordado en la esquina de unos manteles que tenía sobre el regazo.

En cuanto oyó a Tom, se puso en pie de un brinco y los dejó caer.

—¡Mi niño, mi niño! —dijo, agarrándosele al cuello—. ¡Nunca pensé que viviría este día! Estamos en la ruina… van a venderlo todo… ¡Pensar que tu padre se casó conmigo para llegar a esto! No tenemos nada… seremos mendigos… tendremos que ir al asilo de pobres…

Lo besó, se sentó de nuevo y se puso otro mantel sobre el regazo. Lo desdobló un poco para mirar el dibujo mientras los niños permanecían de pie a su lado en silenciosa desdicha, sin otra idea en la mente que las palabras «mendigo» y «asil».

—Y pensar que yo misma hilé esta ropa —prosiguió, levantando una cosa tras otra y agitándola, con una animación extraña y lastimosa, especialmente en una mujer recia y linfática como ella, normalmente tan pasiva: si en alguna ocasión anterior se había alterado, había sido en da superficie—. ¡YJob Haxey tejió la pieza y cargó con ella sobre *l'*espalda hasta casa, pues recuerdo que yo estaba en la puerta y lo vi venir, y era antes de que pensara en casarme con tu padre! Y el dibujo que escogí… Lo bien que la blanqueé… Y la marqué con un punto tan especial que hay que cortar la tela para quitar el hilo. Y ahora todo se venderá… irá a parar a casas de desconocidos, donde quizá la corten con dos cuchillos y se desgaste antes de que me muera. Nunca será tuya, hijo mío —dijo, mirando a Tom con dos ojos llenos de lágrimas—, y era para ti. Quería que toda la que lleva este dibujo fuera para ti: Maggie podía quedarse con la de dos cuadros grandes, que no luce tanto con los platos puestos.

Tom se sintió profundamente conmovido, pero reaccionó con enfado de inmediato.

—Pero ¿es que las tías van a dejar que se venda, madre? —preguntó acalorado—. ¿Lo saben? No permitirán que su ropa se pierda, ¿verdad? ¿Las ha avisado?

—Sí, envié a Luke en cuanto pusieron en casa a dos alguaciles, y ha estado aquí da tía Pullet. Ay, hijo, no paraba de gritar y de decir que tu padre ha deshonrado a mi familia y *l'*ha convertido en la comidilla de toda la región: y comprará la ropa de topos porque todavía quiere tener más y así

no irá a parar a manos de desconocidos, pero ya tiene demasiados cuadros. —La señora Tulliver empezó a guardar dos manteles en el arcón tras doblarlos y alisarlos con gestos mecánicos—. Y también ha venido el tío Glegg, y dice que hay que comprar algunas cosas para que tengamos con qué acostarnos, pero que tiene que hablar con tu tía; y van a ir a consultar… Pero sé que ninguno de ellos comprará mi *pocelana* —dijo, volviéndose hacia las tazas y platos— porque a todos les pareció mal cuando la compré por culpa de la ramita dorada que tiene pintada entre las flores. Pero ninguno tiene mejor *pocelana*, ni siquiera la tía Pullet, y además la compré con mi dinero porque ahorré desde los quince años. Y la tetera de plata también: tu padre no ha pagado nada de lo que hay aquí. ¡Y pensar que se casó conmigo para esto!

La señora Tulliver se echó a llorar de nuevo y sollozó con el pañuelo ante los ojos durante unos momentos; después se lo apartó y dijo con tono de desprecio, todavía entre sollozos, como si se viera obligada hablar antes de poder dominar la voz.

—Y mira que se lo dije una y otra vez: «Hagas lo que hagas, no se te ocurra meterte en pleito». ¿Qué más podía hacer yo? He tenido que quedarme sentada mientras gastaba mi fortuna, que tendría que haber sido la de mis hijos. No tendrás ni un penique, hijo mío… Pero no será por culpa de tu madre.

Extendió un brazo hacia Tom y lo miró lastimeramente con sus indefensos e infantiles ojos azules. El pobre muchacho se le acercó y la besó; ella se aferró a él. Por primera vez en su vida, Tom pensó en su padre con cierto reproche. Su tendencia natural a la censura —de la que hasta el momento su padre se había librado gracias a la predisposición a pensar que tenía siempre razón, por el mero hecho de ser el padre de Tom Tulliver— se abrió paso hacia este nuevo canal debido a los lamentos de su madre y junto con la que sentía contra Wakem, empezó a mezclarse otro tipo de indignación. Tal vez su padre hubiera contribuido a su ruina y a que la gente hablara de ellos con desprecio: pero nadie menospreciaría a Tom Tulliver durante mucho tiempo. La fuerza y firmeza naturales de su carácter empezaban a manifestarse, acicateadas por el doble estímulo del

resentimiento contra sus tías y la sensación de que debía comportarse como un hombre y cuidar de su madre.

—No se inquiete, madre —dijo tiernamente—. Pronto podré ganar dinero: conseguiré algún trabajo.

—¡Bendito seas, hijo mío! —exclamó da señora Tulliver, algo más calmada. Después, mirando a su alrededor con tristeza, añadió—: Pero no me preocuparía tanto si pudiera quedarme las cosas que llevan mi nombre.

Maggie había contemplado la escena cada vez más enfadada. Los reproches implícitos contra su padre —su padre, que yacía ahí al lado como una especie de muerto viviente— le impedían apenarse por manteles y porcelanas. Y la rabia que sentía en nombre de su padre se acentuaba con un resentimiento egoísta por la silenciosa complicidad de Tom con su madre para excluirla de la calamidad común. Era ya casi indiferente al habitual menosprecio de su madre, pero de dolía mucho que Tom, aunque fuera de modo pasivo, lo respaldara. La pobre Maggie no sentía por sus seres queridos una devoción absoluta, pero exigía justa correspondencia a quienes tanto quería. Terminó por estallar.

—¡Madre! ¿Cómo puede decir eso? —dijo en tono alterado, casi violento. Como si sólo le importaran las cosas que llevan su nombre y no las que llevan también el de padre. ¡Y preocuparse por estas cosas en lugar de dedicarse solamente a nuestro querido padre, que está ahí acostado y tal vez nunca vuelva a hablar con nosotros! Tom, deberías decir lo mismo que yo y no permitir que nadie lo critique.

Maggie, casi ahogada por la mezcla de pena y rabia, salió de la habitación y volvió a ocupar su puesto a la cabecera del lecho de su padre. Al pensar en que la gente iba; a censurarlo, sintió que lo quería más que nunca. Maggie no soportaba las críticas: había tenido que aguantarlas durante toda la vida y no habían hecho más que fomentar su mal genio. Su padre siempre la había defendido y excusado, y el cariñoso recuerdo de su ternura le daba fuerzas para hacer o soportar cualquier cosa por él.

Tom se irritó un poco ante el estallido de Maggie: ¡cómo se le ocurría decirle a él, y también a su madre, lo que debían hacer! Y adoptar esos modales autoritarios y arrogantes… Sin embargo, no tardó en entrar en el dormitorio de su padre y al verlo se conmovió tanto que se de borraron las

impresiones negativas de la hora anterior. Maggie vio lo impresionado que estaba y se acercó a él, y cuando Tom se sentó junto a la cama, le pasó un brazo por los hombros. Los dos niños olvidaron todo lo que no fuera la certeza de que tenían un solo padre y una sola pena.

Capítulo III

El consejo de familia

A la mañana siguiente, los tíos llegaron a las once para celebrar un consejo de familia. El fuego estaba encendido en el salón y la pobre señora Tulliver, con la confusa idea de que se trataba de una gran ocasión, similar a un funeral, quitó la funda a las bordas de las cintas de las campanas, soltó las cortinas y arregló adecuadamente los pliegues mientras miraba a su alrededor y meneaba tristemente la cabeza al contemplar las superficies y las patas de las mesas, tan pulidas que ni siquiera su hermana Pullet podría reprocharles falta de brillo.

El señor Deane no iba a acudir, ya que estaba en viaje de negocios; pero la señora Deane apareció puntualmente con la nueva y hermosa calesa con capota y cochero de librea, la cual había proyectado una luz muy reveladora sobre diversos rasgos de su carácter ante algunas de sus amistades femeninas de Saint Ogg's. El ascenso del señor Deane en la escala social había sido tan rápido como el hundimiento del señor Tulliver, y en casa de la señora Deane la ropa blanca y la vajilla de plata procedentes de los Dodson estaban empezando a ocupar un lugar secundario, como mero repuesto de artículos semejantes pero más hermosos comprados en años más recientes: este cambio había provocado alguna frialdad en las conversaciones fraternales entre la señora Deane y la señora Glegg, que percibía que Susan estaba volviéndose «como los demá» y que pronto poco quedaría del verdadero espíritu de los Dodson, excepto en ella misma y era de esperar que también en los sobrinos que llevaban el apellido Dodson en

las fincas familiares situadas en los lejanos Wolds. Las personas que viven lejos muestran menos defectos que aquellos que se encuentran ante nuestros ojos; y parece superfluo, si tenemos en cuenta la remota posición geográfica de los etíopes y lo poco que los griegos tenían que ver con ellos, preguntarse por qué Homero los denominó «intachable»[21].

La señora Deane fue la primera en llegar y, después de que se acomodara en el gran salón, acudió la señora Tulliver con su lindo rostro algo distorsionado, de modo similar a como habría estado si hubiera llorado: no era mujer de lágrima fácil, excepto en momentos en que la posibilidad de perder los objetos de su casa parecía inusualmente verosímil, pero se daba cuenta de lo poco adecuado que resultaba conservar la calma en aquellas circunstancias.

—¡Oh, hermana, qué mundo éste! —exclamó al entrar—. ¡Qué cosas pasan! La señora Deane era una mujer de labios finos que pronunciaba breves y meditados discursos en ocasiones especiales; después se los repetía a su marido y le preguntaba si no le parecía que sus palabras habían sido muy acertadas.

—Sí, hermana —contestó lentamente—. Este mundo cambia mucho y no sabemos hoy lo que podrá suceder mañana. Pero hay que estar preparado para todo y, si llegan los problemas, debemos recordar que no se nos envían sin motivos. Como hermana tuya que soy, lo siento mucho por ti, y si el médico dice que el señor Tulliver tome jalea, espero que me lo digas: te la enviaré enseguida. Porque es justo que esté bien atendido mientras está enfermo.

—Gracias, Susan —contestó la señora Tulliver, retirando su gruesa mano de la fina mano de su hermana—. Pero todavía no ha hablado de jaleas. —Después, tras una pausa, añadió—: Arriba tengo una docena de jarras de jalea talladas… Nunca volveré a llenarlas…

Pronunció estas últimas palabras con voz alterada, pero el sonido de unas ruedas le hizo pensar en otra cosa. El señor y la señora Glegg habían llegado y los Pullet aparecieron casi de inmediato.

La señora Pullet entró llorando: así expresaba, en toda ocasión, su punto de vista sobre la vida en general y su opinión sobre aquel caso en particular.

La señora Glegg llevaba el más rizado de sus postizos y unas ropas que parecían recién resucitadas tras soportar alguna forma de enterramiento propiciadora de las arrugas: un traje elegido con el elevado propósito moral de instilar una humildad perfecta en el ánimo de Bessy y de sus hijos.

—Señora Glegg, ¿no deseas sentarte más cerca del fuego? —preguntó su esposo, que no quería ocupar el sillón más cómodo sin ofrecérselo primero.

—Ya ves que me he sentado aquí, Glegg —contestó la arrogante mujer —. Ásate tú, si te gusta.

—Bueno —dijo el señor Glegg, sentándose sin perder el buen humor—. ¿Y cómo está el pobre enfermo *d'*arriba?

—Esta mañana el doctor Turnbull lo ha encontrado mucho mejor —contestó la señora Tulliver—: parece más despierto y ha hablado conmigo, pero todavía no reconoce a Tom y mira al pobre chico como si no lo conociera, aunque alguna vez ha dicho algo sobre Tom y el poni. El médico dice que ha perdido la memoria de todo lo reciente y no reconoce a Tom porque lo recuerda como un niño. ¡Ay, madre mía!

—A lo mejor se *l'*ha metido agua en el cerebro —señaló la tía Pullet dándose la vuelta tras colocarse bien la cofia con gesto triste frente al espejo del entrepaño-A lo mejor no vuelve a levantarse y, si se levanta, lo más seguro es que se quede como un niño, como el pobre señor Carr. Tenían que darle de comer con una cucharita como si fuera un nene. No podía mover los brazos ni las piernas; pero tenía una silla de ruedas y alguien que lo llevara, y tú no tienes eso, Bessy.

—Hermana Pullet —intervino la señora Glegg con severidad—: si no *m'*equivoco, hemos venido esta mañana para hablar y dar consejos sobre lo que hay que hacer en relación con la deshonra que ha caído sobre la familia y no para hacer comentarios sobre desconocidos. Y que yo sepa, ese señor Carr no es de nuestra sangre ni ha estado nunca relacionado con nosotros.

—Hermana Glegg —protestó la señora Pullet en tono lastimero, volviendo a ponerse los guantes y ajustándose los dedos con agitación—: si tienes algo ofensivo que decir sobre el señor Carr, *has* el favor de no decírmelo a mí. Yo sí lo conocía —añadió con un suspiro—: respiraba tan mal que se le oía a dos habitaciones de distancia.

—¡Sophy! —exclamó la señora Glegg indignada—. Es indecoroso explicar así los males ajenos. Insisto en lo que he dicho: no he venido aquí desde mi casa para hablar de las amistades, respiren bien o mal. Si no estamos aquí para oír lo que los demás piensan hacer para salvar a una hermana y a sus hijos de la caridad pública, yo, al menos, me voy. No va a encargarse una sola y no esperéis que lo haga todo yo.

—Bueno, Jane —dijo la señora Pullet—. No creo que *t'*hayas dado mucha prisa en hacer algo. Por lo que yo sé, es la primera vez que vienes desde que se sabe que *l'*alguacil está en la casa; en cambio, yo estuve ayer aquí y miré toda la ropa y las cosas de Bessy, y le dije que compraría los manteles de lunares; no puedo ser más justa; y de la tetera, que Bessy no quiere que salga de la familia, la verdad es que no me vale de nada tener dos teteras de plata, aunque no tuviera el pitorro recto; en cambio, el damasco con lunares siempre me ha gustado.

—Desearía que pudieran arreglarse las cosas para que mi tetera, la *pocelana* y los azucareros no salieran a la venta —intervino la señora Tulliver con tono suplicante—: y las tenacillas para los terrones de azúcar, que fue lo primero que compré.

—Pero no se puede evitar, ya lo sabes —contestó la señora Glegg—. Si alguien de la familia quiere comprarlo, puede hacerlo, pero todo habrá que subastarlo.

—Tampoco se puede esperar —señaló el tío Pullet con inesperada independencia de juicio— que la familia pague más por los *ojetos* de lo que vaya a darse por ellos en la subasta. Lo probable es que en la subasta se vendan por una bicoca.

—¡Ay de mí! —exclamó la señora Tulliver—. Pensar que mi *pocelana* se venderá así… y la compré cuando me casé, como vosotras, Jane y Sophy: y sé que no os gustaba la mía, por culpa de la ramita, pero a mí sí me gustaba, y no se ha desportillado ni una pieza, porque la he lavado siempre yo… y esos tulipanes en las tazas, y esas rosas que da gusto mirar… Seguro que a vosotras no os gustaría que vuestra *pocelana* la subastaran por una bicoca y terminara rota, aunque la tuya no tenga color, Jane, porque es blanca y estriada y no costó tanto como la mía. Y los

azucareros, hermana Deane. Creía que te gustaría tenerlos porque te oí decir una vez que eran bonitos.

—Bien, no diré que no vaya a comprar algunos de los mejores *ojetos* —dijo la señora Deane con aire altivo—. En casa caben cosas de sobra.

—¡Los mejores *ojetos*! —exclamó la señora Glegg; su severidad había ido creciendo con el largo silencio—. Me agota la paciencia oíros hablar de «mejores *ojeto*». y de comprar eso y aquello, la plata y la *pocelana*. Bessy, debes concentrarte en las circunstancias y dejar de pensar en plata y *pocelana* para ocuparte de tener un colchón de borra para acostarte, una manta para taparte, y un taburete donde sentarte. Recuerda que si los tienes será porque tus parientes te los habrán comprado, porque ahora dependes de ellos para todo: porque tu marido está en cama *imposiblitado* y no tiene un penique. Y te digo todo esto por tu propio bien, para que te hagas cargo de tu situación y de la deshonra que tu marido ha traído a esta familia, ya que tendrás que ocuparte de todo y comportarte con humildad.

La señora Glegg hizo una pausa, ya que hablar con energía por el bien de los demás es cosa muy fatigante. La señora Tulliver, que siempre había estado aplastada por el dominio de su hermana Jane, que le había hecho llevar el yugo de los hermanos menores desde tierna edad, contestó en tono suplicante:

—*T'*aseguro, hermana, que no he pedido a nadie un favor, sólo que compren cosas si les apetece tenerlas, para que no se estropeen en casa de desconocidos. No he pedido a nadie que las compre para mí y mis hijos, aunque ahí está la ropa que yo hilé, y cuando Tom nació, una de las primeras cosas que pensé cuando estaba acostado en la cuna fue que todas las cosas que había comprado con mi propio dinero y que había cuidado tanto serían para él. Pero no he dicho nada de que quisiera que mis hermanas las pagaran. Nadie sabe lo que mi esposo ha hecho por su propia hermana, y ahora tendríamos más dinero si él no se lo hubiera prestado y no le hubiera pedido nunca que lo devolviera.

—Vamos, vamos —intervino el señor Glegg amablemente—. No pintemos el panorama demasiado negro. Lo que está hecho no puede deshacerse. Entre todos nos las arreglaremos para comprar lo que usted necesite aunque, como dice la señora Glegg, deben ser cosas útiles y

sencillas. No debemos ponernos a pensar en lo que no hace falta. Una mesa y una silla o dos, *utinsilios* de cocina, una buena cama y cosas así. En otros tiempos yo mismo no sabía lo que era dormir en una cama. En realidad tenemos muchas cosas inútiles sólo porque tenemos dinero para gastar.

—Glegg —protestó la señora Glegg—, si fueras tan amable de permitirme, hablar en lugar de quitarme las palabras de la boca… Iba a decir, Bessy, que está muy bien que digas que nunca nos has pedido que te compremos cosas: pues permite que te diga que deberías habérnoslo pedido. Dime, ¿quién va a ocuparse de ti, si no es tu familia? Si no lo hace, tendrás que vivir de la caridad parroquial. Y deberías metértelo en la cabeza y no olvidarlo, y rogar humildemente que hagamos por ti lo que podamos en lugar de alardear de no habernos pedido nunca nada.

—Hablando de lo que ha dicho usted de los Moss y de lo que el señor Tulliver ha hecho por ellos —señaló el señor Pullet, que se volvía inusualmente charlatán en cuanto se hablaba de prestar dinero—. ¿Han dicho algo? Deberían hacer algo, igual que los demás; y si se les ha dejado dinero, debería obligárseles a que lo devolvieran.

—Pues claro —intervino la señora Deane—. Ya lo había pensado. ¿Cómo es que el señor y la señora Moss no están aquí para hablar con nosotros? Lo justo es que ellos también arrimen el hombro.

—¡Ay madre! Si no les he enviado recado contando lo del señor Tulliver —exclamó la señora Tulliver—. Y viven tan lejos, por los caminos de Basset, que sólo se enteran de las noticias cuando el señor Moss va al mercado. Pero ni se *m'*ocurrió pensar en ellos. Aunque me sorprende que a Maggie no se le haya ocurrido, porque, siempre ha querido mucho a la tía Moss.

—¿Por qué no vienen tus hijos, Bessy? —sugirió la señora Pullet tras la alusión a Maggie—. Deberían oír lo que tienen que decir sus tíos y tías: y hablando de Maggie, ya que yo le he pagado la mitad de los estudios, debería pensar más en mí que en su tía Moss. Podría morirme hoy mismo de repente: nunca se sabe.

—Si por mí fuera —dijo la señora Glegg—, los chicos habrían estado en la sala desde el principio. Ya es hora de que sepan con quién pueden contar, y es justo que alguien hable con ellos y les informe de su situación

en la vida, en qué se han convertido, y les explique lo mucho que van a tener que sufrir por los errores de su padre.

—Bien, iré a buscarlos, hermana —contestó la señora Tulliver con resignación; estaba abatida y los tesoros guardados en el ropero ya no le inspiraban más sentimientos que una muda desesperación.

Subió al piso para buscar a Tom y a Maggie, que se encontraban en el dormitorio de su padre y, cuando se encaminaba de nuevo hacia la planta baja, al pasar ante la puerta del ropero se le ocurrió una nueva idea. Se encaminó hacia allí y dejó que los chicos bajaran solos.

Cuando los hermanos entraron con cierta renuencia parecía como si sus tíos acabaran de sostener una agitada discusión; Tom, con una sagacidad práctica alentada por los fuertes estímulos de las nuevas emociones que había experimentado desde el día anterior, había estado elaborando un plan que pretendía proponer a alguno de sus tíos o tías, pero no sentía la menor simpatía hacia ellos y temía enfrentarse a todos a la vez, de la misma manera que tampoco habría deseado tomar de golpe una gran dosis de un medicamento concentrado que, incluso a pequeños sorbos, le resultara apenas tolerable. En cuanto a Maggie, aquella mañana se encontraba especialmente abatida: la habían despertado a las tres, tras un breve descanso, y ese extraño sopor fatigado, consecuencia de velar el sueño de un enfermo durante las frías horas de la penumbra y el amanecer, cuando la vida diurna parece carecer de importancia y ser un mero margen de las horas en la alcoba oscura. Su entrada interrumpió la conversación. Saludaron a sus tíos estrechándoles la mano en una ceremonia triste y silenciosa, hasta que el tío Pullet señaló, cuando se le acercó Tom:

—Bien, caballerete: decíamos que vamos a necesitar que cojas papel y pluma; supongo que ahora, tras la escuela, tendrás pocas oportunidades para escribir.

—Eso es —dijo el tío Glegg con un tono admonitorio que pretendía ser amable—. Debemos sacar partido a esos estudios que tan caros han salido a tu padre.

Cuando no quedan tierras ni dinero,
la educación es lo primero.

—Tom, ha llegado el momento de que nos demuestres lo mucho que has aprendido. Veamos si lo haces mejor que yo, que he hecho mi fortuna sin estudios. Pero empecé con muy poco: podía vivir con un tazón de gachas y un mendrugo de pan con queso. Pero no creo que la buena vida y los buenos estudios que has tenido *t'*hagan más difícil el camino de lo que fue para mí, jovencito.

—Pero tendrá que seguir adelante —intervino la tía Glegg con energía — sea fácil o difícil. No debe pararse a pensar en lo que es difícil, sino convencerse de que sus parientes no lo van a mantener para que lleve una vida de ocio y lujo: tendrá que recoger los frutos de la mala conducta de su padre y acostumbrarse a comer mal y a trabajar mucho. Y debe ser humilde y mostrarse agradecido a sus tíos y tías por lo que están haciendo por su madre y su padre, que acabarían en la calle y en el asilo si no recibieran su ayuda. Y también su hermana debe meterse en la cabeza que debe ser humilde y trabajadora —prosiguió la señora Glegg, mirando con severidad a Maggie, que se había sentado en el sofá junto a la tía Deane, atraída hacia ella sólo porque era la madre de Lucy—, porque ya no tendrá criados que la sirvan, y debe tenerlo muy presente. Tendrá que hacer el trabajo de la casa, respetar y querer a sus tías que tanto han hecho por ella y han ahorrado dinero para dejárselo a sus sobrinos y sobrinas.

Tom seguía de pie junto a la mesa, en el centro del grupo. Estaba sonrojado y distaba de parecer humillado: se disponía a decir, en un tono respetuoso, lo que había meditado previamente cuando se abrió la puerta y entró de nuevo su madre.

La pobre señora Tulliver llevaba en las manos una pequeña bandeja donde había colocado la tetera de plata, una taza y un plato de muestra, los azucareros y las tenacillas para los terrones.

—Aquí tienes, hermana —dijo, mirando a la señora Deane mientras depositaba la bandeja sobre la mesa—. Se *m'*ha ocurrido pensar que si veías otra vez la tetera, como hace mucho tiempo que la viste por última vez, a lo mejor te gustaba más: hace un buen té y tiene el juego completo: podrías utilizarlo a diario, o guardarlo para Lucy. Sería horrible que lo compraran los de *The Golden Lion* —dijo la pobre mujer emocionada, con lágrimas en los ojos—. La tetera que compré cuando me casé… y pensar que se arañará

y la colocarán delante de los viajeros y de la gente, con mis iniciales: mirad, aquí pone E. D, y todo el mundo las verá…

—¡Santo cielo! —dijo la tía Pullet, meneando la cabeza con gran pesadumbre—. Es muy triste pensar que las iniciales de la familia estarán por ahí. Nunca había sucedido, has tenido muy mala suerte, Bessy. Pero de qué sirve comprar la tetera cuando la ropa, los cubiertos, todo irá por ahí, algunos con tu nombre completo… Es que, además, tiene el pitorro recto.

—No se puede evitar la deshonra de la familia comprando teteras —declaró la señora Glegg—. Nuestra vergüenza es que un miembro de la familia se haya casado con un hombre que *l'*ha llevado a la mendicidad. Nuestra vergüenza es que van a vender sus bienes en pública subasta. No podemos impedir que todo el mundo lo sepa.

Ante la alusión a su padre, Maggie se levantó de un brinco del sofá, pero Tom vio el gesto y su rostro encendido a tiempo de impedir que hablara.

—Tranquila, Maggie dijo Tom con tono autoritario, apartándola. Y en cuanto calló la tía Glegg, en una muestra de autodominio y sensatez notables en un muchacho de quince años, empezó a hablar en un tono tranquilo y respetuoso, si bien le temblaba la voz, porque las palabras de su madre lo habían herido en lo más vivo.

—Así pues, tía —dijo, mirando directamente a la señora Glegg—, si usted cree que es una vergüenza para la familia que se vendan nuestros bienes en pública subasta, ¿no seria preferible impedirlo? Y si usted y la tía Pullet —prosiguió, mirando hacia esta última— están pensando en legarnos dinero a Maggie y a mí, ¿no sería mejor que nos lo dieran ahora para pagar la deuda y evitar así que mi madre se separe de sus cosas?

Durante unos momentos se hizo el silencio, ya que todos, incluida Maggie, se asombraron ante la súbita actitud varonil de Tom. El tío Glegg fue el primero en hablar.

—Vaya, vaya, muchacho. No vas por mal camino. Pero debes recordar que está la cuestión del interés: tus tías reciben el cinco por ciento de su dinero y lo perderían si os lo adelantaran: no habías pensado en eso.

—Puedo trabajar y pagar un interés anual —contestó Tom rápidamente —. Haré todo lo que sea necesario para evitar que mi madre pierda sus

cosas.

—¡Bien dicho! —exclamó el tío Glegg con admiración, movido por el deseo de animar a Tom, sin pararse a pensar en la posibilidad de llevar a la práctica su plan; sin embargo, su intervención tuvo el infortunado efecto de molestar a su esposa.

—¡Sí, señor Glegg! —dijo la dama con enfadado sarcasmo—. Ya veo que te gusta dar mi dinero, aunque me dijiste que estaba a mi disposición. Y mi dinero me lo dio mi padre y no el tuyo, Glegg, y he ahorrado y añadido un poco casi cada año. Y ahora se va destinar a comprar objetos de otros, a fomentar el lujo y el despilfarro que ellos no pueden mantener por ningún medio. Y yo tendré que alterar mi *testamiento*, o añadir un *codicilio*, y dejar doscientas o trescientas libras menos cuando me muera; yo, que siempre me he comportado correctamente y con prudencia; yo, que soy la mayor de la familia. Ahora tengo que despilfarrar el dinero en unas personas que han tenido las mismas oportunidades que yo, pero se han comportado mal y lo han despilfarrado. Hermana Pullet, tú puedes hacer lo que quieras y puedes permitir que tu marido te quite el dinero que te ha dado, pero esa no es mi intención.

—¡Vaya, Jane!, ¡cómo te pones! —dijo la señora Pullet—. La sangre te va a subir a la cabeza y tendrán que hacerte una sangría. Lo siento por Bessy y sus hijos, paso unas noches horribles pensando en ellos, porque ahora, con esta nueva medicina, duermo muy mal: pero no vale la pena que piense en hacer algo si no me vas a ayudar.

—Bien, hay que tener en cuenta una cosa —dijo el señor Glegg—: de nada sirve saldar esta deuda y salvar *los ojetos* de la casa cuando están también todas las otras deudas legales que se llevarán cada chelín que se pueda sacar de la tierra y del ganado, y todavía más: lo sé porque he hablado con el abogado Gore. Tenemos que guardar el dinero para este pobre hombre en lugar de gastarlo en ojetos que no se pueden comer ni beber. Siempre te precipitas, Jane… como si yo no supiera lo que es más razonable.

—En ese caso, que se vea en tus palabras, Glegg —exclamó su esposa lentamente y con mucho énfasis, inclinando la cabeza hacia él en un gesto elocuente.

La serenidad de Tom había desaparecido durante la conversación y le temblaban los labios, pero estaba decidido a no rendirse. Se comportaría como un hombre. Maggie, por el contrario, tras el momentáneo entusiasmo por las palabras de Tom, volvía a temblar de indignación. Su madre se encontraba junto a Tom y se aferraba a su brazo desde el momento en que éste había hablado: de repente, Maggie se puso de pie y se plantó ante ellos con los ojos centelleantes como una joven leona.

—Entonces —estalló—, ¿por qué han venido aquí a hablar, a meterse en nuestras cosas y regañarnos, si no piensan hacer nada para ayudar a mi pobre madre, su propia hermana? ¿Si les da igual que tenga problemas y no quieren prescindir de su dinero, aunque no lo necesiten, para evitarle este trago? En ese caso, no queremos saber nada de ustedes y no vengan a buscar defectos a mi padre: era mejor que ustedes, porque era un buen hombre y los habría ayudado en caso de apuro. Si no ayudan a mi madre, Tom y yo no querremos saber nada de su dinero. ¡Preferiremos no tenerlo! ¡Nos las arreglaremos sin él!

Tras estas palabras de desafío a sus tíos, Maggie permaneció inmóvil, mirándolos con sus grandes ojos oscuros, como si estuviera preparada para afrontar las consecuencias.

La señora Tulliver estaba asustada: aquel loco estallido resultaba ominoso y ya no podía imaginar qué curso tomaría la vida tras él. Tom, en cambio, estaba enfadado: no servía para nada hablar así. La sorpresa hizo callar a las tías durante un momento. Finalmente, ante una aberración semejante, les pareció más adecuado comentarla que dar respuesta a las preguntas que había planteado.

—Lo que vas a sufrir por culpa de esta niña, Bessy —anunció la señora Pullet. Es lo más desagradecido y descarado que he visto en mi vida. Es terrible. No tenía que haberle pagado el colegio, porque está peor que nunca.

—Eso es lo que yo siempre he dicho —prosiguió la señora Glegg—. A lo mejor otros se sorprenden, pero yo no. Lo he dicho una y otra vez, hace ya muchos años: «Recordad lo que os digo: esta niña va por mal camino, no hay en ella nada de nuestra famili». Y en lo que respeta a tanto estudio,

nunca me pareció buena idea. Tenía mis motivos cuando dije que yo no pensaba pagar nada de eso.

—Vamos, vamos —dijo el señor Glegg—. No perdamos más tiempo hablando y pongámonos a trabajar. Tom, coge papel y pluma…

Mientras la señora Glegg hablaba, una figura alta y oscura pasó apresuradamente ante la ventana.

—Caramba, aquí está la señora Moss —dijo la señora Tulliver—; se habrá enterado de la mala noticia.

Fue a abrir la puerta y Maggie se apresuró a seguirla.

—Es una suerte —dijo la señora Glegg—, así podrá dar su consentimiento para la lista de cosas que hay que comprar. Es justo que se ocupe de lo que le corresponde, ya que se trata de su hermano.

La señora Moss estaba demasiado agitada para negarse a seguir a la señora Tulliver cuando ésta la condujo hasta el salón con un gesto mecánico, sin pensar que era poco atento por su parte llevarla ante tanta gente en el doloroso momento de la llegada. Aquella mujer alta, ajada y morena, vestida con un traje raído, cubierta con un chal y una capota colocados a toda prisa y con la total ausencia de afectación propia de las personas profundamente preocupadas ofrecía un fuerte contraste con las hermanas Dodson. Maggie la asía por el brazo y la señora Moss pareció no ver a nadie más que a Tom, se dirigió hacia él y lo tomó de la mano.

—¡Queridos niños! —exclamó—. Cómo vais a pensar bien de mí: soy una tía que no sirve de nada, porque soy de los que toman mucho y dan poco. ¿Cómo está mi pobre hermano?

—El doctor Turnbull cree que se irá poniendo mejor —contestó Maggie —. Siéntate, tía Gritty, y no te inquietes.

—Oh, querida niña, no sé qué hacer, estoy entre dos fuegos —dijo la señora Moss, permitiendo que Maggie la acompañara hasta el sofá, aunque se diría que seguía sin advertir la presencia de los demás—: tenemos trescientas libras del dinero de mi hermano, y ahora que las necesita, y vosotros también, pobrecitos, tendremos que venderlo todo para devolverlo. Pero tengo hijos… mis ocho niños… el pequeño todavía no habla bien… Y me siento como si fuera una ladrona. Pero estoy segura de que mi hermano… —Un sollozo le impidió seguir hablando.

—¡Trescientas libras! ¡Santo cielo! —exclamó la señora Tulliver. Cuando había dicho que su esposo había hecho lo indecible por su hermana no pensaba en ninguna cantidad concreta y ahora sentía la irritación propia de una esposa mantenida en la ignorancia.

—¡Qué locura! —exclamó la señora Glegg—. ¡Un hombre con familia! No tenía derecho a prestar dinero de ese modo: y sin ningún papel, seguro. La voz de la señora Glegg atrajo la atención de la señora Moss que, alzando la mirada, dijo:

—Sí, mi marido firmó un pagaré. No somos de esa clase de gente capaz de robar a los hijos de su hermano y pensábamos devolverle el dinero cuando las cosas fueran un poco mejor.

—Bien —dijo el señor Glegg—, pero ahora ¿tiene su esposo de dónde sacar el dinero? Porque para ellos sería una pequeña fortuna, si conseguimos salvarlos de la bancarrota. Su esposo posee ganado: es justo que reúna el dinero, me parece, aunque lo sienta mucho por ustedes, señora Moss.

—Oh, señor, no sabe usted la mala suerte que ha tenido mi esposo con el ganado: tenemos menos que nunca, hemos vendido todo el trigo y estamos atrasados en el pago de la renta… Desearíamos hacer lo cometo y trabajaría durante media noche si sirviera de algo… pero mis pobres niños… tengo cuatro tan pequeños…

—No llores así, tía, no te inquietes —susurró Maggie, que tenía una mano entre las suyas.

—¿Tulliver te prestó todo el dinero de una vez? —preguntó la señora Tulliver, todavía absorta en las cosas que habían ido sucediendo sin que ella se enterara.

—No, en dos veces —contestó la señora Moss, frotándose los *ojos* y haciendo un esfuerzo por contener las lágrimas—. La última vez fue después de aquella enfermedad que tuve, hace cuatro años, cuando todo nos fue mal, y entonces se firmó otro pagaré. Con mi enfermedad y mi mala suerte, no he sido más que una carga durante toda mi vida.

—Sí, señora Moss —afirmó tajante la señora Glegg—: la suya es una familia muy desgraciada: mi hermana es digna de lástima.

—Subí al carro en cuanto *m'*enteré de lo que había sucedido —dijo la señora Moss, mirando a la señora Tulliver—. No habría tardado tanto en venir si usted se hubiera acordado de avisarme. Y no es que piense mucho en nosotros y nada en mi hermano; es que como no paraba de pensar en el dinero, no podía evitar hablar de él. Mi esposo y yo deseamos hacer lo adecuado, señor —añadió, mirando al señor Glegg—. Nos las apañaremos y devolveremos el dinero si eso es lo único que tiene mi hermano. Estamos acostumbrados a los apuros y no esperamos otra cosa, pero cuando pienso en mis hijos, me siento dividida en dos.

—Bien, debo advertirle una cosa, señora Moss —dijo el señor Glegg—: si el señor Tulliver es declarado en bancarrota y tiene un pagaré de su esposo por trescientas libras, tendrán que pagarlas: los apoderados acudirán a cobrarlas.

—¡Ay, madre mía! —exclamó la señora Tulliver pensando, no en la inquietud de la señora Moss sino en la bancarrota. La pobre señora Moss escuchaba sumisa y temblorosa, mientras Maggie contemplaba desconcertada y abatida a Tom, para ver si, por lo menos él, daba muestras de entender el problema y de preocuparse por la tía Moss. Tom, con los ojos clavados en el mantel, parecía pensativo.

—Y si no se le declara en bancarrota —prosiguió el señor Glegg—, entonces, como he dicho antes, la cantidad de trescientas libras será para él una fortuna, pobre hombre. Lo único que sabemos es que podría quedar medio paralítico, si es que vuelve a levantarse. Lo siento mucho por usted, señora Moss, pero creo que, por un lado, es justo que se esfuerce en conseguir ese dinero y, por otro, de cualquier modo van a verse obligados a devolverlo. Espero que no se ofenda conmigo por decirle la verdad.

—Tío —dijo Tom alzando la vista de repente y abandonando la contemplación del mantel—. No creo que mi tía esté obligada a devolver el dinero. ¿Y si no fuera ésa la voluntad de mi padre?

—¡Cómo! —exclamó el señor Glegg tras unos instantes de sorpresa—. No, quizá no, Tom; pero en ese caso, habría roto el pagaré. Debemos buscarlo: ¿qué te hace pensar que no tenía intención de reclamarlo?

—Porque recuerdo muy bien que, antes de que me marchara a estudiar con el señor Stelling —contestó Tom sonrojándose, pero esforzándose por

hablar con firmeza a pesar de su temblor infantil—, mi padre me dijo una noche cuando estábamos sentados junto al fuego y no había nadie más en la habitación… —Tom vaciló un momento y después prosiguió—… Me dijo algo sobre Maggie y después añadió: «Siempre he sido bueno con mi hermana, aunque se casó contra mi voluntad; y he prestado dinero a Moss, pero nunca lo pondré en un aprieto para que me lo devuelva: prefiero perderlo; no por eso mis hijos serán más pobre». Ahora mi padre está enfermo y no puede hablar por sí mismo, y yo no quisiera que se actuara en contra de su voluntad.

—Bien, pero hijo mío —dijo el tío Glegg, cuyos buenos sentimientos lo empujaban a compartir los deseos de Tom, pero al mismo tiempo no podía desprenderse de su habitual aversión ante actitudes alocadas, tales como destruir documentos o prescindir de algo lo bastante importante como para suponer una diferencia apreciable en las propiedades de un hombre—: en ese caso, tendremos que destruir el pagaré, si queremos impedir lo que podría llegar a suceder si se declarara a tu padre en bancarrota…

—Señor Glegg —interrumpió su esposa con severidad—: ten cuidado con lo que dices. Estás metiéndote mucho en los asuntos de los demás. Si dices alguna imprudencia, no digas después que fue culpa mía.

—Nunca había oído decir nada semejante —dijo el tío Pullet tras tragarse a toda prisa su caramelito para expresar su asombro—: destruir un pagaré; seguro que está castigado por la ley.

—Pero si ese pagaré vale tanto dinero —dijo la señora Tulliver—, ¿por qué no lo damos para salvar mis cosas? No tenemos por qué meternos en los asuntos de los tíos Moss, Tom, si crees que tu padre se enfadará cuando se cure.

La señora Tulliver no comprendía la cuestión y se esforzaba en encontrar ideas originales.

—¡Bah! —dijo el tío Glegg—. Las mujeres no entienden estas cosas: no hay otra manera de proteger al señor y la señora Moss que destruyendo el pagaré.

—Entonces, espero que me ayude a hacerlo, tío —insistió Tom—. Si mi padre no se recuperara, sentiría mucho pensar que se había hecho algo contra su voluntad a pesar de que yo podía impedirlo. Y estoy seguro de que

quería que recordara lo que me dijo esa noche. Debo obedecer los deseos de mi padre en relación con sus bienes.

Ni siquiera la señora Glegg pudo evitar dar su aprobación a las palabras de Tom: sin duda, la sangre de los Dodson hablaba por él, aunque si su padre hubiera sido un Dodson, nunca habría hecho un préstamo tan imprudente. Maggie no se habría contenido y habría saltado a abrazar a Tom si la tía Moss no se lo hubiera impedido levantándose y cogiéndole la mano para decir con voz ahogada:

—Querido muchacho, si Dios existe, tu gesto no te hará más pobre: y si tu padre necesita este dinero, Moss y yo lo pagaremos, igual que si existiera el pagaré. Nos comportaremos tal como os habéis comportado con nosotros, porque si mis hijos no han tenido más suerte que ésa, al menos tienen un padre y una madre honrados.

—Bien —dijo la señora Glegg, que había estado pensando en las palabras de Tom—. Suponiendo que, *efetivamente*, tu padre esté en bancarrota, no creo que eso suponga un engaño para los acreedores. Lo he pensado atentamente, porque yo misma he sido acreedora y he visto infinitas trampas. Si antes de meterse en este funesto pleito tu padre tenía ya intención de regalarle el dinero a tu tía, es lo mismo que si hubiera destruido entonces el pagaré, puesto que había decidido empobrecerse voluntariamente. Pero hay que tener en cuenta muchas otras cosas, jovencito, cuando se trata de dinero —añadió la señora Glegg mirando a Tom con aire de censura—: no puedes quitarle a un hombre la comida para darle a otro el desayuno. Pero está claro que no lo entiendes.

—Sí, claro que sí —contestó Tom con decisión—: sé que si debo dinero a un hombre no tengo derecho a dárselo a otro. Pero si mi padre había decidido dar el dinero a mi tía antes de endeudarse, entonces sí tenía derecho a hacerlo.

—¡Bien contestado, muchacho! No creía que fueras tan listo —dijo el tío Glegg con franqueza—. Pero quizá tu padre llegó a destruir el pagaré. Miremos si lo encontramos en el arcón.

—Está en su habitación. Vamos nosotras también, tía Gritty —susurró Maggie.

Capítulo IV

Un rayo de luz se desvanece

Incluso entre los accesos de rigidez espasmódica que padecía a intervalos regulares desde que lo habían encontrado a los pies del caballo, el señor Tulliver se hallaba en un estado tan apático que las entradas y salidas de la habitación tenían lugar sin grandes miramientos. Aquella mañana había permanecido tan quieto, con los ojos cerrados, que Maggie dijo a la tía Moss que no esperara que su padre advirtiera su presencia.

Entraron sin hacer ruido y la señora Moss se sentó junto a la cabecera de la cama, mientras Maggie volvía a ocupar su puesto sobre ésta y colocaba la mano sobre la de su padre sin que en el rostro de éste se produjera cambio alguno.

El señor Glegg y Tom habían entrado también de puntillas y se afanaban por encontrar la llave del viejo arcón de roble en el manojo que Tom había traído del escritorio de su padre. Abrieron el arcón, situado a los pies de la cama del señor Tulliver, y apoyaron la tapa en el soporte de hierro sin hacer apenas ruido.

—Hay una caja de lata —susurró el señor Glegg—: es posible que guarde allí algo pequeño como un pagaré. Levántala, Tom; pero primero quitaré yo estas escrituras. Supongo que son las de la casa y el molino, y veremos qué hay debajo.

El señor Glegg había levantado los pergaminos y, afortunadamente, se había apartado ya un poco cuando el soporte cedió y la pesada tapa cayó con tal estruendo que resonó por toda la casa.

Tal vez aquel sonido, más allá de la fuerte vibración, poseía alguna característica especial que produjo un efecto instantáneo en el hombre postrado, el cual se liberó de la parálisis durante unos instantes. El arcón había pertenecido a su padre y al padre de su padre, y su apertura había constituido siempre una ceremonia solemne. Todos los objetos que conocemos desde hace tiempo, incluso el simple cierre de una ventana o un pestillo concreto, producen sonidos que son como una voz familiar, una voz que nos estremece y despierta cuando toca fibras muy profundas. En ese preciso momento, cuando todos los ojos de los presentes estaban vueltos hacia él, el señor Tulliver se incorporó con un respingo y, con expresión de reconocerlos perfectamente, miró el arcón, los pergaminos que estaban en las manos del señor Glegg y a Tom con la caja de hojalata.

—¿Qué van a hacer con esas escrituras? —preguntó con el tono que acostumbraba a emplear cuando estaba irritado—. Ven aquí, Tom. ¿Qué estás hurgando en mi arcón?

Tom obedeció, tembloroso: era la primera vez que su padre lo reconocía. Pero en lugar de decirle algo más, éste siguió mirando, cada vez con más recelo, al señor Glegg y las escrituras.

—¿Qué está pasando aquí? —espetó—. ¿Para qué toca usted mis escrituras? ¿Wakem está quedándose con todo…? ¿Por qué no me cuentan lo que han estado haciendo? —añadió con impaciencia mientras el señor Glegg avanzaba hacia los pies de la cama antes de hablar.

—No, no, amigo Tulliver —dijo Glegg con tono tranquilizador—. Todavía nadie se queda con nada. Sólo hemos venido a ver lo que había en el arcón. Ha estado enfermo, ¿sabe?, y teníamos que encargarnos un poco de las cosas. Pero esperemos que pronto se encuentre lo bastante bien para ocuparse usted de todo.

El señor Tulliver miró a su alrededor con aire pensativo: a Tom, al señor Glegg y a Maggie; de repente, advirtiendo que había alguien junto a la cabecera, se volvió bruscamente y vio a su hermana.

—¡Ah, Gritty! —exclamó con el tono entre triste y cariñoso que acostumbraba a emplear con ella—: Cómo es eso, ¿también estás aquí? ¿Y cómo te las has apañado pera dejar a los niños?

—¡Oh, mi querido hermano! —dijo la buena señora Moss, demasiado impulsiva para ser prudente—. Cuánto *m'* alegro de haber venido y de verte otra vez como siempre: pensaba que nunca más volverías a reconocernos.

—¡Cómo! ¿He tenido un ataque? —preguntó el señor Tulliver inquieto, mirando al señor Glegg.

—Se cayó del caballo y ha estado un poco pachucho, sólo es eso, me parece —dijo el señor Glegg—. Pero enseguida se encontrará bien, espero.

El señor Tulliver clavó los ojos en la ropa de la cama y permaneció en silencio durante dos o tres minutos. Su rostro volvió a ensombrecerse. Miró a Maggie y le preguntó con tono grave:

—Así pues, ¿tenéis la carta, mocita?

—Sí, padre —contestó y le dio un beso con todo el corazón. Se sentía como si su padre hubiera regresado de entre los muertos y ella pudiera cumplir ya el deseo de demostrarle lo mucho que lo había querido siempre.

—¿Dónde está tu madre? —preguntó, tan preocupado que recibió el beso con la pasividad de un animal.

—Está abajo con las tías, padre: ¿quiere que vaya a buscarla?

—Sí, sí, pobre Bessy y cuando Maggie salió de la habitación, volvió los ojos hacia Tom.

—Si me muero, tendrás que ocuparte de las dos, Tom. Tendréis muchos apuros de dinero. Pero debes intentar pagarlo todo. Y acuérdate: invertí cincuenta libras de Luke en el negocio, me las dio hace tiempo y no tiene ningún papel que lo demuestre: debéis pagarle a él en primer lugar.

El tío Glegg meneó la cabeza involuntariamente con aire más inquieto que nunca, pero Tom dijo con firmeza:

—Sí, padre. ¿Y no tiene usted el pagaré por trescientas libras de mi tío Moss? Habíamos venido a buscarlo. ¿Qué quiere que haga con él?

—Ah, *m'*alegro de que pensaras en eso, muchacho —dijo el señor Tulliver-Siempre he tenido intención de ser indulgente con ese dinero, por tu tía. No debe importaros perderlo si no pueden pagar y lo más seguro es que no puedan. ¡Cuidado, el pagaré está en esa caja! Siempre he querido portarme bien contigo, Gritty, aunque ya sabes que me sacaste de quicio cuando *t'*empeñaste en casarte con Moss.

En ese momento, Maggie regresó con su madre, que entró muy alterada por la noticia de que su esposo volvía a ser el de siempre.

—Bien, Bessy —dijo él mientras ella le daba un beso—: tendrás que perdonarme si tu situación económica es peor de lo que habías imaginado nunca. Pero la culpa es de la ley, no mía —añadió enfadado—. ¡Es culpa *d'*esos bribones! Tom, atiende bien: si tienes la oportunidad, castiga a Wakem por lo que ha hecho. Si no lo haces, es que no vales para nada como hijo. Podrías darle con el látigo, pero haría que te castigara la ley: la ley está hecha para defender a los bribones.

El señor Tulliver se estaba excitando y acalorando de modo alarmante. El señor Glegg deseaba decir algo tranquilizador, pero se lo impidió Tulliver, que hablaba de nuevo a su esposa.

—Ellos harán un gran esfuerzo para pagarlo todo, Bessy —dijo—, y para que te quedes con tus cosas, y tus hermanas te ayudarán… y Tom crece… aunque no sé lo que será de él… yo he hecho todo lo que he podido… le he dado una educación… y la mocita se casará… Pero las cosas están muy mal…

El efecto sanador de la fuerte vibración se agotó y con estas últimas palabras el pobre hombre volvió a caer en un estado de inconsciencia y rigidez. Aunque no dejaba de ser una repetición de lo sucedido antes, impresionó a los presentes como si se tratara de la muerte, no sólo por contraste con el estado anterior, sino también porque sus palabras habían aludido a la posibilidad de que su fallecimiento estuviera cerca. Pero para el pobre Tulliver la muerte no sería un salto, sino un largo descenso hacia sombras cada vez más densas.

Enviaron a buscar al doctor Turnbull; cuando éste oyó lo que había sucedido dijo que una recuperación total, aunque fuera solo momentánea, era indicio esperanzador de que no existía una lesión permanente que le impidiera curarse del todo.

Entre las cuestiones pendientes que el enfermo había mencionado no se encontraba el documento de venta: el breve destello de memoria sólo había iluminado las ideas más destacadas, y volvió a caer en la desmemoria sin recordar parte de la humillación sufrida.

Sin embargo, Tom tenía dos cosas bien claras: había que destruir el pagaré del tío Moss y tenía que devolver el dinero de Luke, aunque fuera recurriendo al que él y Maggie guardaban en la caja de ahorros. Como bien puedes ver, lector, en algunas cuestiones Tom era mucho más rápido que cuando se trataba de las sutilezas de la construcción clásica o las relaciones de una demostración matemática.

Capítulo V

Tom da el primer paso

Al día siguiente a las diez, Tom estaba ya de camino hacia Saint Ogg's para ver al tío Deane, que debía llegar a casa la noche anterior, según había dicho su tía; y Tom había decidido que el tío Deane era la persona adecuada para pedir consejo a fin de conseguir un trabajo. Participaba en negocios importantes, no tenía la estrechez de miras del tío Glegg y había progresado socialmente de una manera acorde con las ambiciones de Tom.

Era una mañana oscura, gélida y neblinosa que, probablemente, terminaría en lluvia: una de esas mañanas en las que incluso las personas felices se refugian en sus esperanzas. Y Tom se sentía muy desgraciado: percibía con la nitidez propia de un carácter orgulloso la humillación y las futuras dificultades que le depararía la suerte; y junto a la firme fidelidad hacia su padre se mezclaba una indignación incontenible contra él, lo que daba a la desgracia el matiz insoportable del error. Puesto que eso era lo que sucedía cuando se recurría a los tribunales, su padre tenía toda la culpa, tal como siempre habían dicho los tíos; un dato muy revelador sobre el carácter de Tom era el hecho de que aunque pensaba que sus tías deberían hacer algo más por su madre, no sentía nada similar al violento rencor de Maggie contra ellas por no mostrarse más tiernas o más generosas. En Tom no había ningún impulso que lo llevara a esperar lo que no le parecía un derecho que pudiera exigir. ¿Por qué iba la gente a dar dinero a manos llenas a quienes no sabían cuidar del suyo? Le parecía justa cierta severidad, especialmente porque confiaba en que nunca se le aplicara a él. Le resultaba muy duro

verse en una situación tan desfavorable por la falta de prudencia de su padre, pero no pensaba quejarse ni buscar defectos a los demás porque no le facilitaran las cosas. No pediría más ayuda que un trabajo y un sueldo a cambio. El pobre Tom no carecía de esperanzas en las que refugiarse de la húmeda y gélida prisión de la niebla de diciembre que parecía formar parte de sus problemas familiares. A los dieciséis años, ni siquiera el pensamiento más apegado a la realidad puede escapar a la ilusión y a la vanidad y Tom, mientras bosquejaba su futuro no tenía más guía que una valiente confianza en sí mismo. Sabía que tanto el señor Glegg como el señor Deane habían sido muy pobres: Tom no quería ahorrar dinero lentamente y retirarse con una fortuna moderada como el tío Glegg, sino que deseaba ser como el tío Deane: conseguir un puesto en una gran empresa y ascender rápidamente. Apenas había visto al tío Deane durante los últimos tres años, puesto que las dos familias habían ido distanciándose pero, por ese mismo motivo, Tom confiaba en que sirviera para algo recurrir a él. Estaba seguro de que el tío Glegg nunca respaldaría un proyecto osado, pero tenía cierta idea de la magnitud de los recursos de que disponía el tío Deane. Tiempo atrás, oyó una vez decir a su padre que Deane se había convertido dentro de Guest & Co. en alguien tan importante como para que le ofrecieran participar en el negocio: y Tom había decidido que él haría lo mismo. Le resultaba intolerable ser pobre y que lo miraran por encima del hombro toda la vida. Se ocuparía de su madre y de su hermana, y conseguiría que todo el mundo dijera que era un hombre de gran carácter. Saltaba así sobre los años y, empujado por una decisión tan firme como sus deseos, olvidaba que estarían hechos de lentísimos días, horas y minutos.

Cuando ya había cruzado el puente de piedra sobre el Floss y estaba entrando en Saint Ogg's, pensaba en que, cuando fuera lo bastante rico, compraría de nuevo el molino y las tierras de su padre, mejoraría la casa y viviría allí: la preferiría a otra más elegante y más nueva, y allí podría tener tantos caballos y perros como deseara.

Mientras caminaba por la calle con un paso rápido y firme, perdido en estas ensoñaciones, se cruzó con un vecino y éste lo sobresaltó con una voz tosca y familiar:

—¡Caramba, señorito Tom! ¿Cómo está su padre esta mañana? —Era un tabernero de Saint Ogg's, uno de los clientes de su padre.

Aunque le molestó que lo interrumpiera en aquel momento, contestó cortésmente:

—Está muy enfermo, gracias.

—Ah, qué mala suerte han tenido, joven, al perder el pleito —dijo el tabernero, con aliento a cerveza y la confusa idea de ser amable.

Tom se sonrojó y siguió adelante: incluso la referencia más cortés y delicada a su situación le habría causado el mismo dolor que si le apretaran en un cardenal.

—Éste es el hijo de Tulliver —comunicó el tabernero al tendero que se encontraba ante una puerta cercana.

—Ah, ya decía yo que lo reconocía. Se parece a la familia de su madre: era una Dodson. Es un chico serio, ¿qué le han enseñado?

—A mirar por encima del hombro a los clientes de su padre y a ser un caballero: creo que poco más.

La conciencia del presente despertó a Tom de los sueños sobre el futuro y aceleró el paso para alcanzar las oficinas de Guest & Co., donde confiaba en encontrar al tío Deane. Pero le dijo un empleado, con cierto desprecio por su ignorancia, que aquella mañana le tocaba estar en el banco: los jueves por la mañana el señor Deane no se encontraba en River Street.

En el banco, tras anunciar su nombre, permitieron a Tom entrar en el despacho privado donde se encontraba su tío. El señor Deane estaba revisando cuentas, pero en cuanto entró Tom levantó la vista.

—Buenos días, Tom —dijo, tendiéndole la mano—. ¿Alguna novedad por tu casa? ¿Cómo está tu padre?

—Igual, gracias, tío —contestó Tom, nervioso—. Quisiera hablar con usted en cuanto tenga tiempo.

—Siéntate, siéntate —dijo el señor Deane, volviendo a sus cuentas, en las que él y un empleado permanecieron tan absortos durante la siguiente media hora que Tom empezó a preguntarse si tendría que seguir allí sentado hasta que cerrara el banco, ya que el monótono trabajo de los acicalados y prósperos hombres de negocios no parecía mostrar ninguna tendencia a concluir. ¿Querría su tío darle un puesto en el banco? Sería un trabajo

tedioso y aburrido, pensó, estar allí siempre escribiendo, siguiendo el tictac del reloj. Prefería otros caminos para hacerse rico. Finalmente se produjo un cambio: su tío cogió una pluma y escribió algo con una rúbrica al final.

—Señor Spence, si le parece bien, vaya ahora a ver a Torry —dijo el señor Deane, y, de repente, a Tom le pareció que el sonido del reloj era menos lento y pausado.

—Bien, Tom —dijo el señor Deane en cuanto estuvieron solos, acomodando el corpachón en la butaca y sacando la caja de rapé—. ¿Qué pasa? El señor Deane, que había oído contar a su esposa lo sucedido el día anterior, pensaba que Tom acudía para rogarle que buscara algún modo de evitar la venta.

—Le ruego que me excuse por molestarlo, tío —dijo Tom sonrojándose, con voz que, aunque algo temblorosa, reflejaba cierta orgullosa independencia—, pero me parece que es usted la persona más adecuada para aconsejarme qué debo hacer.

—¿Sí? —preguntó el señor Deane, deteniendo la pulgarada de rapé y mirando a Tom con nueva atención—. Dime.

—Desearía conseguir un empleo para ganar un poco de dinero —dijo Tom, que no era partidario de los circunloquios.

—¿Un empleo? —preguntó el señor Deane; se acercó entonces la pulgarada de rapé a la nariz y la repartió con meticulosa justicia en cada orificio. Tom pensó que la costumbre de tomar rapé era la más irritante que conocía.

—Veamos, ¿qué edad tienes? —preguntó el señor Deane mientras se recostaba de nuevo en la butaca.

—Dieciséis, estoy a punto de cumplir los diecisiete —dijo Tom con la esperanza de que su tío advirtiera cuánta barba tenía.

—Veamos… Tu padre tenía intención de que fueras ingeniero, ¿no es eso?

—Pero creo que con ese oficio tardaría en ganar dinero, ¿no?

—Es cierto: pero no es fácil ganar mucho dinero con nada, muchacho, cuando se tiene sólo dieciséis años. Aunque has estudiado muchos años: supongo que sabes mucho de cuentas, ¿no? ¿Sabes teneduría?

—No —contestó Tom, con cierto titubeo—. Estudiaba fracciones. Pero el señor Stelling dice que tengo buena letra, tío. Esta es mi letra —añadió Tom, poniendo sobre la mesa una copia de la lista que había hecho la víspera.

—Ah, muy bien, muy bien. Pero mira, el mejor calígrafo del mundo si no es buen tenedor de libros no llega a más que a amanuense. Y un copista es barato. Pero, entonces, ¿qué has aprendido en tus estudios?

El señor Deane no se había interesado nunca por los métodos de educación y no tenía una idea exacta de lo que sucedía en los colegios caros.

—Aprendíamos latín, mucho latín —dijo Tom y, con una pequeña pausa entre cada materia, como si estuviera repasando los libros de su escritorio Para ayudarse a recordar, añadió—: y el último año escribí composiciones, una semana en latín y la otra en inglés; y estudié historia de Grecia y de Roma; y Euclides; y empecé álgebra, pero lo dejé; y cada semana teníamos un día de aritmética. También me daban lecciones de dibujo, y también estudiábamos o leíamos varios libros de poesía inglesa, *Horae Paulinae* y la *Retórica* de Blair, durante el último semestre.

El señor Deane tamborileó sobre la caja de rapé y frunció los labios: se sentía como muchas personas estimables que, tras leer la lista de nuevos aranceles se sorprendían al ver cuántos bienes se importaban sin que supieran nada de ello: como precavido hombre de negocios, no pensaba hablar imprudentemente de una materia prima de la que no tenía experiencia alguna. Pero suponía que si aquello fuera bueno, un hombre de tanto éxito como él no lo ignoraría. En cuanto al latín, su opinión personal era que, en caso de otra guerra, puesto que la gente ya no se empolvaba el cabello, estaría bien poner un impuesto sobre el latín como lujo propio de las clases altas y totalmente ajeno al mundo de las navieras. Aunque, por lo que sabía, lo de las *Horae Paulinae* podría ser algo menos neutral. En conjunto, esta lista de conocimientos le provocaba cierto rechazo hacia el pobre Tom.

—Bien —dijo finalmente, con un tono frío y algo sardónico—: has dedicado tres años a estas cosas, debes de saber mucho. ¿No crees que sería mejor que buscaras algo relacionado con ellas?

Tom se sonrojó y exclamó con nueva energía.

—Preferiría que el trabajo no estuviera relacionado con eso, tío. No me gustan el latín ni esas cosas. No sé para qué me servirán, como no sea para hacer de profesor ayudante en un colegio y, ni siquiera las conozco lo bastante bien para ello: además, antes preferiría ser chico de los recados, no me gusta convertirme en esa clase de persona. Me gustaría entrar en un negocio en el que pudiera progresar, un trabajo de hombres en el que tuviera que cuidar cosas y labrarme una reputación. Y desearía cuidar de mi madre y de mi hermana.

—Ah, jovencito —dijo el señor Deane, con esa tendencia a reprimir las esperanzas de los jóvenes que los prósperos y robustos hombres de negocios de cincuenta años consideran uno de sus más simples deberes—, es más fácil decirlo que hacerlo.

—Pero tío, ¿no fue así como usted empezó? —preguntó Tom, un poco irritado porque el señor Deane tardara tanto en respaldar su punto de vista —. ¿No fue ascendiendo por su capacidad y buen comportamiento?

—Sí, sí, caballero —dijo el señor Deane arrellanándose en la butaca y apresurándose a recordar su trayectoria—; pero te diré cómo lo hice: no me monté a horcajadas en un palo, esperando que se convirtiera en un caballo si esperaba lo suficiente. Mantenía los oídos y los ojos bien alerta, no me importaba *eslomarme y* convertía el interés de mi patrono en el mío. Caramba, si sólo vigilando lo que sucedía en el molino vi cómo se despilfarraban quinientas libras al año tontamente. No tuve más estudios que los que dan las instituciones benéficas, pero pronto me di cuenta de que no podría avanzar mucho sin saber teneduría y aprendí en las horas libres que me dejaba el trabajo, tras descargar barcos. Mira esto —el señor Deane abrió un libro y señaló la página—: tengo buena letra y estoy a la altura de cualquiera en todo tipo de cálculos mentales, y todo esto lo he conseguido trabajando mucho y pagándolo con mi sueldo, muchas veces quitándolo de la comida y de la cena. Y me fijaba en todas las cosas relacionadas con el negocio y luego les daba vueltas. Caramba, no soy mecánico y nunca he pretendido serlo, pero se *m'*han ocurrido un par de cosas que a ellos ni les han pasado por la cabeza, y eso ha supuesto una importante diferencia en nuestros beneficios. Y no hay artículo que se cargue o descargue en nuestro

muelle que yo no conozca. Si he ido ascendiendo es porque me he preparado. Si quieres meterte en un agujero redondo, debes convertirte en una pelota: así son las cosas.

El señor Deane tamborileó sobre la caja otra vez. Se había dejado arrastrar por el entusiasmo que suscitaba en él ese tema y se le había olvidado por completo el efecto que podría causar en su interlocutor. No era la primera vez que contaba esa historia y en esta ocasión no había advertido que no tenía ante sí una copa de oporto.

—Bien, tío —dijo Tom con ligero tono de queja—: eso es lo que me gustaría hacer, ¿no puedo progresar del mismo modo?

—¿Del mismo modo? —preguntó el señor Deane, examinando a Tom con calma—. Hay que tener en cuenta varias cosas, caballero. Depende del tipo de artículo con que empieces y de si *t'*han encarrilado por la vía adecuada. Pero yo ya te diré cuál es. Tu padre se equivocó al darte educación. No era asunto mío y no me metí, pero ha sucedido lo que yo pensaba: lo que has aprendido está muy bien para un joven como Stephen Guest, que no hará otra cosa en su vida que firmar cheques y puede tener la cabeza rellena de latín o de cualquier otra cosa.

—Pero tío —insistió Tom—, no veo por qué el latín iba a impedirme entrar en los negocios: pronto se me olvidará todo, no supone ninguna diferencia. Tenía que estudiar las lecciones, pero siempre pensé que no me servirían para nada, no me interesaban nada.

—Sí, sí, muy bien —prosiguió el señor Deane—, pero eso no cambia lo que iba a decir. Quizá te sacudas pronto el latín y esas historias, pero te quedarás como un palo pelero. Además, *t'*ha dejado las manos blancas y *t'*ha quitado la costumbre de trabajar duro. ¿Y qué es lo que sabes? Vaya, si no sabes nada de contabilidad y sabes menos de cálculo que cualquier tendero. Permite que te diga que tendrás que empezar por el escalón más bajo si quieres progresar en esta vida. No sirve de nada olvidar la educación por la que tanto ha pagado tu padre si no te buscas una nueva.

Tom se mordió los labios con fuerza; sentía que las lágrimas pugnaban por salir pero prefería morir a dejarlas asomar.

—Quieres que te ayude a conseguir un empleo —prosiguió el señor Deane—; bien, no tengo nada que *ojetar*. deseo hacer algo por ti. Pero

vosotros los jóvenes creéis que vais a empezar viviendo bien y con un trabajo fácil: no pensáis en que, antes de ir a caballo, uno va a pie. Debes recordar lo que eres: un muchacho de dieciséis años sin ninguna formación para trabajar. Hay montones como tú, como si fueran guijarros que no encajan en ningún lado. Bien, podrías hacer de aprendiz de alguna profesión: boticario, por ejemplo. Quizá en eso ayudara lo del latín…

Tom iba a hablar, pero el señor Deane levantó la mano.

—¡Espera! Escucha lo que tengo que decirte. No quieres ser aprendiz, ya lo sé, ya lo sé: quieres ir más aprisa y, además, no quieres estar detrás de un mostrador. Pero si eres amanuense, estarás detrás de un escritorio y te pasarás todo el día mirando la tinta y el papel: eso no tiene mucho futuro y terminarás el año tan sabio como lo empezaste. El mundo no está hecho de pluma, tinta y papel, y si vas a lanzarte al mundo, joven, deberás saber de qué está hecho. Creo que lo que más oportunidades te ofrecerá será conseguir un empleo en un muelle o un almacén, donde aprenderás cómo son las cosas: pero seguro que eso no te gusta: tendrás que aguantar el frío y la humedad y tratar con gentes toscas. Eres un caballero demasiado refinan para eso.

El señor Deane hizo una pausa y miró a Tom fijamente, el cual contestó tras cierta lucha interior:

—Señor, preferiría hacer lo que, a la larga, sea más provechoso: aceptaré todo lo que sea desagradable.

—Eso está bien, si eres capaz de llevarlo a la práctica. Pero debes recordar que no sólo se trata de sujetar la cuerda, sino de tirar de ella. Ése es el error que cometéis los muchachos que no tenéis nada en el cerebro ni en el bolsillo: creéis que es mejor empezar en un lugar donde puedas conservar limpia la chaqueta y que las mozas de las tiendas os tomen por caballeros. No fue así como yo empecé, jovencito: cuando tenía dieciséis años, la chaqueta *m'*olía a alquitrán y no *m'*asustaba cargar quesos. Por eso ahora puedo ir vestido con buen paño y compartir mesa con los propietarios de las mejores empresas de Saint Ogg's.

El tío Deane tabaleó con los dedos sobre la caja de rapé, se recostó en la butaca y pareció ensancharse un poco bajo el chaleco y la leontina.

—Tío, ¿conoce usted algún empleo vacante para el que sirva? Desearía ponerme a trabajar de inmediato —dijo Tom con un ligero temblor en la voz.

—Para el carro, para el carro: no debemos tener tanta prisa. Debemos tener en cuenta que si te coloco en un sitio para el que seas un poco joven, por la simple circunstancia de ser mi sobrino, seré responsable de ti. Y no hay otro argumento a tu favor que el hecho de que seas mi sobrino, porque todavía está por ver si sirves para algo.

—Espero no dejarlo en mal lugar, tío —contestó Tom, ofendido como cualquier muchacho cuando los adultos declaran la desagradable verdad de que no tienen motivos para confiar en ellos—. También quiero cuidar de mi prestigio.

—¡Bien dicho, Tom! ¡Bien dicho! Esa es la actitud adecuada, y nunca me niego a ayudar a alguien dispuesto a esforzarse. Conozco a un hombre de veintidós años: *m'*he fijado en él y haré por él todo lo que pueda, ya que vale mucho. Pero fíjate en cómo ha aprovechado el tiempo: calcula como el mejor, ya que puede calcular en cuestión de segundos el volumen de cualquier mercancía, y el otro día me mostró un nuevo mercado para las cortezas de madera sueca; y es gran experto en productos manufacturados.

—Tal vez fuera mejor que empezara por la teneduría, ¿no cree, tío? —preguntó Tom, ansioso por demostrar su disposición a esforzarse.

—Sí, sí, eso siempre es un acierto. Pero… Ah, Spence, aquí está usted de nuevo. Bien, Tom, me parece que por ahora no tenemos nada más que decir y tengo que volver a mi trabajo. Adiós. Saluda a tu madre de mi parte.

El señor Deane le tendió la mano en un amistoso gesto de despedida y Tom no se atrevió a hacerle otra pregunta, especialmente delante del señor Spence. De modo que salió de nuevo al aire húmedo y frío. Fue a ver al tío Glegg para tratar la cuestión del dinero de la caja de ahorros y cuando se puso en marcha otra vez, la niebla se había hecho tan densa que apenas veía lo que tenía delante. Mientras caminaba de nuevo por River Street, se sobresaltó al ver, a dos yardas del escaparate de una tienda, las palabras «Molino de Dorlcot» escritas en grandes letras en un anuncio que parecía colocado con el propósito de que le saltara a la vista. Era el catálogo de la

venta que debía tener lugar la semana siguiente, motivo suficiente para que se apresurara a salir del pueblo.

El pobre Tom se encaminó a su casa sin perderse en ensoñaciones sobre el futuro lejano, aplastado por el peso del presente. Le parecía que el tío Deane era injusto al no confiar en él, al no advertir que se desenvolvería bien, cosa de la que el propio Tom estaba tan seguro como de la luz del día. Por lo que parecía, él, Tom Tulliver, estaba destinado a ocupar un lugar muy poco relevante en el mundo y, por primera vez, se sintió abatido al comprender que en realidad era muy ignorante y bien poco podía hacer. ¿Quién sería el envidiable joven que podía calcular el volumen de las cosas en segundos y proponer nuevas ideas sobre las cortezas suecas? ¡Cortezas de Suecia! Tom se había sentido siempre muy satisfecho de sí mismo a pesar de su fracaso en algunas demostraciones y su traducción de *nunc illas promite vires* como «ahora promete a esos hombre»… pero en aquel momento se sentía, de repente, en situación de desventaja, porque sabía menos que los demás. Debía de haber todo un mundo relacionado con la corteza sueca y, si él lo conociera, podría haberle servido para empezar. Habría sido mucho más fácil destacar con un brioso corcel y una silla nueva.

Dos horas antes, cuando Tom caminaba hacia Saint Ogg's, veía ante sí un futuro lejano, como si fuera una tentadora playa tras una franja de guijarros silíceos: entonces se encontraba todavía sobre la hierba y creía que no tardaría en cruzar la zona de piedras. Pero ahora estaba ya en los cantos afilados, que ocupaban una extensión cada vez más ancha, y la playa de arena se había reducido mucho.

—¿Qué ha dicho el tío Deane, Tom? —preguntó Maggie, rodeando a Tom, con el brazo mientras éste se calentaba abatido junto al fuego de la cocina—. ¿Ha dicho que te daría un empleo?

—No, no lo ha dicho. No me ha prometido nada: parecía creer que no podía lograr nada bueno porque soy demasiado joven.

—Pero ¿ha sido amable?

—¿Amable? ¡Bah! ¿De qué sirve hablar de eso? Me da igual que sea amable o no si consiguiera un trabajo. Pero es un fastidio haber estado tanto tiempo estudiando latín y otras cosas que no me han servido para nada, y

ahora el tío dice que tengo que ponerme a estudiar teneduría, cálculo y otras cosas. Parece pensar que no sirvo para nada.

Mientras contemplaba el fuego, la boca de Tom se contrajo en una expresión amarga.

—Oh, qué pena que no hayamos estudiado con dómine Sampson —dijo Maggie, mezclando cierta alegría con su pena—. Si me hubiera enseñado contabilidad por partida doble según el método italiano, como enseñó a Lucy Bertram[22], podría enseñarte, Tom.

—¡Enseñar, tú! Sí, supongo que sí. Siempre te las das de maestra —dijo Tom.

—¡Tom!, si sólo es una broma —exclamó Maggie, apoyando la mejilla contra la manga de la chaqueta de Tom.

—Pero siempre es igual, Maggie —protestó Tom con el ceño ligeramente fruncido, como hacía siempre que se proponía ser razonablemente severo—. Siempre estás poniéndote por encima de mí y de los demás. He pensado muchas veces en decírtelo. No tenías que hablar a los tíos como lo hiciste, debes dejar que yo me ocupe de vosotras y no meterte en nada. Te crees más lista que nadie, pero casi siempre estás equivocada. Soy capaz de juzgar mucho mejor que tú.

¡Pobre Tom! Acababan de sermonearle y de hacerle sentir inferior: la reacción de su carácter fuerte y egocéntrico debía canalizarse de un modo u otro, y con Maggie podía mostrarse justificadamente dominante. Maggie se sonrojó y le temblaron los labios en una mezcla de rencor y afecto, sumada al temor y la admiración que suscitaba en ella un carácter más firme y fuerte que el suyo. No contestó enseguida; le brotaban palabras de enfado, pero las contuvo.

—Muchas veces crees que soy engreída, Tom, pero no es esa mi intención en absoluto —dijo finalmente—. No quiero destacar más que tú y sé que ayer te portaste mejor que yo. Pero eres siempre muy severo conmigo, Tom.

Con estas últimas palabras, regresó el enfado.

—No, no soy severo —afirmó Tom con decisión—. Siempre soy amable contigo y así pienso seguir: siempre me ocuparé de ti, pero debes hacer caso de lo que te diga.

En aquel momento entró su madre y Maggie se apresuró a marcharse, ya que sentía que iba a llorar y no quería que eso sucediera hasta encontrarse a salvo en el piso de arriba. Eran lágrimas amargas: todo el mundo parecía muy severo y muy duro con ella: nadie mostraba indulgencia ni cariño, a diferencia de cómo serían las cosas en el mundo imaginario que se construía. En los libros salían personas que eran siempre amables o cariñosas, disfrutaban haciendo cosas para conseguir que los demás fueran felices y no mostraban su interés encontrando defectos. Maggie pensaba que fuera de los libros, el mundo no era un lugar feliz: parecía ser un mundo en el que la gente se portaba mejor con quienes no simulaba amar y no eran nada suyo. Y si en la vida no había amor, ¿qué le quedaba a Maggie? Sólo la pobreza y la compañía de las mezquinas penas de su madre; quizá también la desgarradora dependencia infantil de su padre. No hay desesperanza más triste que la de la primera juventud, cuando el alma está llena de anhelos, carece de grandes recuerdos y la vida no se prolonga en la de los demás; y, sin embargo, los observadores no tenemos muy en cuenta esta desesperación prematura, como si nuestra visión del futuro iluminara el ciego presente del que sufre.

Maggie, con su vestido marrón, los ojos enrojecidos y el abundante cabello echado hacia atrás, contemplaba desde la cama donde yacía su padre las apagadas paredes de la triste habitación que era ahora el centro de su mundo: era una criatura llena de anhelos impacientes y apasionados por todo lo amable y hermoso, sedienta de todo tipo de conocimientos, ansiosa por oír una música que se extinguía antes de llegar hasta ella, con un deseo ciego e inconsciente de que algo uniera las impresiones maravillosas de esta vida misteriosa y diera a su alma un hogar.

No es de extrañar que, cuando se produce un contraste entre el exterior y el interior tengan lugar dolorosas colisiones. Una muchacha de aspecto anodino que nunca será una Safo, una *madame* Roland ni un personaje destacado puede, a pesar de ello, albergar en su interior una fuerza similar a la de una semilla que, tarde o temprano, e incluso de modo violento, se abre paso.

Capítulo VI

Encaminado a refutar los prejuicios populares sobre
el obsequio de una navaja

La venta de los enseres domésticos tuvo lugar en los oscuros días de diciembre y duró hasta la tarde del segundo día. El señor Tulliver, que en los momentos de lucidez había empezado a manifestar una irritabilidad que con frecuencia parecía tener como consecuencia directa la reaparición de la rigidez espasmódica y la pérdida de conciencia, yació como un muerto viviente durante las horas críticas, cuando más cerca estuvo de su alcoba el ruido de la venta. El doctor Turnbull había decidido que supondría menor riesgo dejarlo donde estaba que trasladarlo a la casita de Luke, tal como el bondadoso empleado había propuesto a la señora Tulliver, pensando que sería mala cosa que el señor «se despertar» al oír la subasta; y la esposa y los niños permanecieron encerrados en el silencioso dormitorio, contemplando temblorosos la larga figura acostada en la cama, no fuera el rostro inexpresivo a dar señales de respuesta a los sonidos que les llegaban con una repetición obstinada y dolorosa.

Pero por fin terminaron aquellos momentos de pertinaz incertidumbre e inquietud agotadora. Cesó el sonido agudo de una voz casi tan metálica como el martillazo que la seguía; se extinguió el rumor de los pasos en la gravilla. El rubio rostro de la señora Tulliver parecía haber envejecido diez años durante las últimas treinta horas: la pobre mujer había estado concentrada intentando adivinar qué martillazo ponía fin a la subasta de cada uno de sus objetos favoritos, y el corazón le palpitaba al pensar que

uno tras otro sería identificado como suyo públicamente en *The Golden Lion*; y durante todo aquel tiempo la mujer tuvo que permanecer sentada sin dar muestra alguna de la agitación que sentía. Esa tensión produce arrugas en los rostros más perfectos e incrementa el número de mechones blancos en los cabellos que en otros tiempos parecieron bañados en rayos de sol. A las tres, Kezia, la doncella de mal carácter y buen corazón que había mirado a las personas que habían acudido a la venta como si fueran enemigos personales y como si la suciedad que traían en los pies fuera especialmente perversa, empezó a trotar y a lavar con energía sin dejar de murmurar contra «esos que iba a comprar las cosas de los demá» y no les importaba arañar la superficie de las mesas de caoba de otras personas mejores que ellos. No lo limpió todo, porque la gente que todavía tenía que recoger sus compras volvería a ensuciar, pero sí arregló el salón donde había permanecido sentado ese «cerdo con pip» del alguacil para darle el aspecto más acogedor posible mediante un poco de limpieza y los escasos artículos comprados para la familia. Kezia estaba decidida a que la señora y los niños tomaran allí el té por la tarde.

Entre las cinco y las seis, hacia la hora habitual del té, subió las escaleras y anunció que el señorito Tom tenía visita. La persona que quería hablar con él se encontraba en la cocina y, en el primer momento, a la luz del fuego irregular y el de la vela, Tom no reconoció en absoluto la silueta ancha e inquieta de un muchacho tal vez un par de años mayor que él que lo miraba con unos ojos azules en un rostro redondo y pecoso, mientras tironeaba de unos mechones rojos con intenso aire de respeto. Un sombrero de hule y copa pequeña y una fina capa de brillante suciedad sobre el resto de su atuendo, como la de una tablilla para escribir, sugería una profesión relacionada con los barcos, pero eso no le refrescó la memoria a Tom.

—*Pa* servirle, señor Tulliver —dijo el de los mechones rojizos con una sonrisa que pareció abrirse paso en un rostro voluntariamente apenado—. Me supongo que no me recuerda —prosiguió mientras Tom lo miraba con aire interrogante—, pero me gustaría hablar un poco con *usté*.

—Hay fuego en el salón, señorito —anunció Kezia, que se resistía a dejar la cocina en el delicado momento de tostar el pan.

—Entonces, pasa por aquí —dijo Tom, preguntándose si aquel joven trabajaría en el muelle de Guest & Co., ya que no dejaba de pensar en ello y en que en cualquier momento el tío Deane podía enviarle recado de que había un empleo.

El fuego brillante del salón era la única luz que iluminaba las sillas, el escritorio, el suelo sin alfombra y la única mesa —no, no era la única: quedaba otra en un rincón, con una gran Biblia y algunos libros encima—. Lo primero que advirtió Tom fue aquella extraña desnudez, antes de acordarse de mirar de nuevo el rostro que también estaba iluminado por el fuego y que lo observaba de soslayo, con un aire entre tímido e interrogante.

—¡Cómo! —preguntó una voz totalmente desconocida—. ¿No recuerda *usté* a Bob, al que regaló una navaja, señor?

Sacó en ese mismo instante la gastada navaja y abrió la enorme hoja a modo de demostración irresistible.

—¡Vaya! ¿Eres Bob Jakin? —preguntó Tom, no del todo cordial, porque se avergonzaba un poco de aquella antigua intimidad, simbolizada por la navaja, y no estaba muy seguro de que los motivos de Bob para recordarla fueran totalmente irreprochables.

—Ajajá, Bob Jakin: tengo que decir el apellido, porque hay muchos Bobs. El que iba tras las ardillas con *usté* el día en que me caí de una rama y me di un golpe en la espinilla, pero conseguí la ardilla y una buena cicatriz. Y la hoja se rompió, ya ve, pero no quise que pusieran otra porque podrían engañarme y darme otra navaja, porque no hay una hoja igual en *to* el país, está acostumbrada a mi mano. Nunca nadie me ha *dao na*, sólo he tenido lo que he podido coger, sólo usté, señor Tom; bueno, Bill Fawks me dio el cachorro de terrier en lugar de ahogarlo, pero tuve que darle mucho al *pico pa* convencerlo.

Bob dijo todo esto con locuacidad y voz aguda, a una velocidad sorprendente; al terminar, se frotó con afecto la hoja contra la manga.

—Bien, Bob —dijo Tom con ligero aire de suficiencia: los recuerdos mencionados lo habían inclinado a mostrarse adecuadamente amable, aunque de su trato con Bob lo que mejor recordaba era la pelea que los había separado definitivamente—. ¿Qué puedo hacer por ti?

—Oh, no es eso, señor Tom —contestó Bob, cerrando la navaja con un chasquido y devolviéndola al bolsillo, donde parecía hurgar buscando otra cosa—. No habría venido a pedirle *na* ahora que, según dice la gente, está en apuros el amo al que le espantaba los pájaros, que *m'*azotaba un poco, medio en broma, cuando me pillaba comiéndome un nabo, pero dicen que ya no se levantará más. No se *m'*ocurriría venir a pedirle otra navaja porque una vez me dio una. Si uno me pone un ojo morado, ya me basta: no le pediré más antes de que yo le sirva: de *tos* modos, un buen gesto vale más que uno malo. No volveré a ser pequeño, señor Tom. Y usté era mi amigo favorito cuando era pequeño, aunque *m'*azotó y no quiso verme más. Por ejemplo, ahí está Dick Brumby: podía darle tanto como quisiera, pero uno se aburre de pegar a un chaval incapaz de ver adónde debe tirar He visto críos capaces de quedarse mirando una rama hasta que se les salen los ojos antes de distinguir la cola de un pájaro de una hoja. Es una pérdida de tiempo ir con esos; pero *usté* era bueno *pa* tirar, señor Tom, y se podía confiar en que daría con el palo en el momento adecuado a una rata, a un armiño o cualquier otro animal cuando yo batía los arbustos.

Bob había sacado una sucia bolsa de lona y tal vez no se habría callado si Maggie no hubiera entrado entonces en la habitación y le hubiera lanzado una mirada de sorpresa y curiosidad, ante lo cual él se pasó la mano por los rojizos mechones con el debido respeto. No obstante, el cambio que había sufrido la habitación cayó al instante sobre Maggie con una fuerza tal que le hizo olvidar la presencia de Bob. Los ojos de Maggie pasaron de Bob al lugar donde antes colgaban unos estantes con libros; no quedaba más que un rectángulo más oscuro en la pared y, debajo, la mesita con la Biblia y unos pocos libros.

—Oh, Tom —exclamó, juntando las manos—: ¿Dónde están los libros? Creí que el tío Glegg los iba a comprar. ¿No los ha comprado? ¿Ha comprado solamente los que quedan?

—Supongo que sí —dijo Tom, con una especie de indiferencia desesperada—. ¿Por qué iban a comprar muchos libros si han comprado tan pocos muebles?

—Pero Tom —dijo Maggie, con los ojos llenos de lágrimas mientras corría hacia la mesa para ver qué libros habían rescatado—. Nuestro

querido *Viaje del peregrino*, ese que tú coloreaste con tus pinturas, y el dibujo del peregrino cubierto con un manto que parecía una tortuga… —Maggie prosiguió, casi sollozando mientras examinaba los escasos libros—: Pensaba que jamás en la vida nos desprenderíamos de ellos… Estamos perdiéndolo todo… Cuando muramos no tendremos con nosotros ningún objeto de cuando nacimos.

Maggie se alejó de la mesa y se dejó caer en una silla mientras unas gruesas lágrimas se preparaban para caerle por las mejillas, olvidando la presencia de Bob, que la observaba con la mirada propia de un animal inteligente y mudo, con mayor percepción que comprensión.

—Bien, Bob —dijo Tom, que consideraba inoportuna la cuestión de los libros—. Imagino que has venido a verme porque estamos en apuros: eso es muy amable por tu parte.

—Le diré a lo que he venido, señor Tom —dijo Bob, empezando a desatar la bolsa de lona—. Durante estos dos años he *estao* en una gabarra, así me he *ganao* la vida, cuando no *m'*ocupaba del horno del molino de Torry. Pero hace un par de semanas tuve suerte. Siempre *m'*he tenido por un tío con suerte, porque siempre que he puesto una trampa he cogido algo. Pero esa vez no fue una trampa, sino que se prendió fuego en el molino y lo apagué yo: si no llego a hacerlo arde el aceite. El amo me dio diez soberanos: me los dio en persona la semana pasada. Y dijo primero que era un chico bien dispuesto, aunque yo ya lo sabía, pero entonces va y saca los diez soberanos, y eso era ya algo nuevo. ¡Aquí están, sólo falta uno! —Y con estas palabras, Bob vació la bolsa sobre la mesa—. Cuando me los dio, la cabeza me se puso a hervir como si fuera una olla de caldo, pensando en qué clase de vida debería llevar, porque se *m'*ocurrían muchos oficios, porque estoy cansado de la gabarra, porque allí los días se hacen más largos que las tripas de un cerdo. Primero pensé que tendría hurones y perros, y sería cazador de ratas; después pensé que quería algo más importante, vivir algo nuevo, porque de cazar ratas ya lo sé *to* y pensé y pensé hasta que al final decidí que quería ser buhonero porque son tipos bien *informaos*, claro que sí, y llevaría las cosas más ligeras en un fardo, y podría darle a la lengua, y eso no se hace con las ratas ni en las gabarras, y recorrería el país

a mis anchas, y camelaría a las mujeres con mi cháchara, y comería caliente en la taberna: ¡Una vida estupenda!

Bob hizo una pausa y después añadió, con una decisión desafiante, como si diera la espalda con firmeza a aquella descripción paradisíaca.

—Pero no *m'*importa, no *m'*importa una pizca. Y he cambian uno de los soberanos *pa* comprar a mi madre una oca *pa* comer, y he compran un chaleco de felpa azul y un gorro de piel de foca, porque si quiero ser buhonero, tengo que tener un aspecto respetable. Pero no m importa, no *m'*importa ni una pizca. No tengo un nabo por cabeza y a lo mejor puedo apagar otro fuego dentro de poco, soy un tío con suerte. Así que le agradecería que aceptara los nueve soberanos, señor Tom, y que haga con ellos lo que quiera, si es verdad que el señor está *arruinao*. No bastarán, pero serán de ayuda.

Tom se conmovió tanto que olvidó su orgullo y sus recelos.

—Bob, eres muy amable —dijo Tom, sonrojándose, con ese pequeño temblor en la voz que le daba cierto encanto, incluso cuando hablaba con aire orgulloso y severo—. Y no volveré a olvidarte. Pero no puedo aceptar los nueve soberanos: sería quitarte una pequeña fortuna y a mí no me servirían de mucho.

—¿No, señor Tom? —preguntó Bob apesadumbrado—. No lo diga porque piense que yo los quiero: no soy pobre. Mi madre gana sus buenos peniques *esplumando* y haciendo otras cosas, y si come otra cosa que pan y agua echa demasiadas carnes: *amás*, yo tengo siempre mucha suerte, y creo que *usté* no tiene tanta: en cualquier caso, el amo no la tiene, y puede tomar un poco de mi suerte y nadie sufre por ello. Vamos, si es que un día encontré una pata de cerdo en el río: de seguro se había caído de uno de esos barcos holandeses de popa redonda. Vamos, piénselo mejor, señor Tom, que somos viejos conocidos; si no, pensaré que está *enfadao* conmigo.

Bob empujó los soberanos; pero antes de que pudiera hablar Tom, Maggie, entrelazando las manos y mirando a Bob con aire contrito, exclamó:

—Oh, Bob: cuánto lo siento. Nunca pensé que fueras tan buena persona. Vamos, ¡si es que eres la mejor persona del mundo!

Bob no advirtió la injuriosa opinión que provocaba el íntimo gesto de penitencia de Maggie y sonrió con placer ante sus elogios, especialmente porque procedían de una joven que, como informó esa misma noche a su madre, poseía «unos ojos como no hay otros; cuando te miran, te dejan *atontao*».

—No, de verdad, Bob. No puedo aceptarlos —insistió Tom—. Pero no creas que por eso aprecio menos tu amabilidad. No quiero tomar nada de nadie, sino ponerme a trabajar. Y esos soberanos no me serían de gran ayuda, de verdad, si me los quedara. Permite que, en cambio, te estreche la mano.

Tom le tendió la rosada palma y Bob no se demoró en darle su mano sucia y curtida.

—Permite que vuelva a guardarte los soberanos en el talego —dijo Maggie—, y ven a vernos cuando tengas ya la bolsa de buhonero.

—Así, es como si hubiera venido a darme aires, a presumir —dijo Bob con aire de descontento cuando Maggie le devolvió la bolsa—. Algunas veces sí soy un poco pillo, pero sólo con los sinvergüenzas o los primos, que me gusta liarlos un poco.

—Pues ahora no te metas en líos, Bob —dijo Tom—: si no, te deportarán a las colonias.

—No, no; a mí no, señor Tom —contestó Bob con aire alegre y confiado—. No hay leyes contra las picaduras de pulga: si no engañara de vez en cuando a los tontos, nunca espabilarían. En fin, tenga *usté* un soberano, señorita, y cómprese algo, como muestra de mi agradecimiento por la navaja. Mientras hablaba, Bob depositó el soberano y cerró el talego de nuevo con decisión. Tom empujó la moneda de oro.

—No, de verdad, Bob: te lo agradezco muchísimo, pero no puedo aceptarla.

Maggie, tomándola entre los dedos, se la tendió a Bob y dijo con más capacidad de persuasión que Tom.

—Ahora no la aceptamos, Bob, pero quizá sí en otra ocasión. Si Tom o mi padre necesitan ayuda que tú puedas prestar, te lo diré, ¿verdad, Tom? Eso es lo que deseas, que sepamos que podemos recurrir a ti como amigo, ¿verdad, Bob?

—Sí, señorita, gracias —dijo Bob, tomando a regañadientes el dinero—. Eso es lo que quiero: que cuenten conmigo *pa* cualquier cosa. Así pues, adiós, señorita, y buena suerte, señor Tom. Gracias por estrecharme la mano, aunque no haya querido tomar el dinero.

La entrada de Kezia y su mirada fulminante mientras preguntaba si debía traer el té o esperar a que las tostadas estuvieran duras como ladrillos puso fin oportunamente a la verborrea de Bob, que se despidió apresuradamente con una inclinación.

Capítulo VII

De cómo una gallina se aficiona a las estratagemas

Pasaban los días y el señor Tulliver daba cada vez mayores muestras, por lo menos, según el criterio del médico, de ir regresando a su condición normal: la parálisis iba mostrándose menos tenaz y la mente reaccionaba mediante combates intermitentes, como un ser vivo que se abriera paso bajo una gran masa de nieve acumulada por el viento con tendencia a deslizarse y a cerrar la abertura recién hecha.

Si la única medida del tiempo para los velantes hubiera sido la dudosa y lejana esperanza, éste habría parecido transcurrir muy despacio: sin embargo, el punto de referencia era la amenaza inminente que hacía llegar demasiado pronto la noche. Mientras el señor Tulliver volvía lentamente a ser el mismo, su destino se apresuraba hacia el momento del cambio. Los tasadores habían hecho su trabajo, del mismo modo que un respetable armero prepara concienzudamente el mosquete que, en poder de un brazo valiente y certero, pondrá fin a una o dos vidas. Las condenas a pagar las costas, los escritos de los tribunales y las sentencias de venta son bombas o balas de cadena legales que nunca dan limpiamente sobre el objetivo, sino que caen causando gran destrozo. Es tan inherente a esta vida que unos sufran por los pecados de otros y tan grande es la inevitable tendencia del sufrimiento humano a difundirse, que incluso la justicia provoca víctimas, y no podemos imaginar castigo que no se extienda en pulsaciones de dolor inmerecido más allá del culpable.

A principios de la segunda semana de enero salieron los carteles anunciando, como consecuencia de la sentencia del tribunal, la venta en pública subasta del ganado y animales de la granja del señor Tulliver, seguida de la venta del molino y tierras adyacentes, a primera hora de la tarde en *The Golden Lion. El* molinero, inconsciente del tiempo transcurrido, se creía todavía en la primera etapa de su desgracia, cuando todavía podía pensar en algún tipo de recurso; y, con frecuencia, en los momentos en que se encontraba consciente, hablaba con voz débil e inconexa de los planes que llevaría a cabo cuando «se pusiera bie». Su esposa y sus hijos todavía albergaban la esperanza de un desenlace que evitara que el señor Tulliver tuviera que abandonar aquel lugar e iniciar una vida totalmente distinta, ya que habían conseguido interesar al tío Deane en aquella etapa del caso. Éste admitía que no sería mal negocio para Guest & Co. comprar el molino de Dorlcote y encargarse del negocio, que era bueno y podía mejorarse con una máquina de vapor; en ese caso, Tulliver podría quedarse como encargado. Sin embargo, el señor Deane no quería decir nada concreto sobre el asunto: el hecho de que la hipoteca estuviera en manos de Wakem podría hacer que se le ocurriera pujar por toda la finca y ofrecer más que la prudente empresa que era Guest & Co., que no se guiaba en sus negocios por motivos sentimentales. El señor Deane se vio obligado a contárselo a la señora Tulliver cuando acudió al molino para examinar los libros en compañía del señor Glegg, después de que ésta señalara que «si Guest & Co. pensaran un poco en ello, se darían cuenta de que el padre y el abuelo del señor Tulliver se ocupaban ya del molino de Dorlcote mucho antes de que nadie pensara siquiera en poner en marcha el molino de esa empres». El señor Deane le contestó que dudaba de que fuera precisamente la relación entre los dos molinos lo que pudiera determinar su valor como inversiones. En cuanto al tío Glegg, ni remotamente se le ocurría embarcarse en semejante inversión: el buen hombre sentía sincera lástima por la familia Tulliver, pero tenía el dinero invertido en excelentes hipotecas y no podía correr riesgos: sería injusto para sus parientes: no obstante, había decidido que Tulliver tuviera unos chalecos nuevos de franela, a los que había renunciado a favor de prendas más elásticas, y que de vez en cuando compraría a la señora Tulliver una libra de té: su benevolencia se recreaba

de antemano en aquellos viajes en que le llevaría té Y contemplaría su felicidad cuando le asegurara que era el mejor té negro.

Con todo, era evidente que el señor Deane estaba bien dispuesto hacia los Tulliver. Un día llevó a Lucy, que se encontraba en casa pasando las vacaciones de Navidad, y la pequeña cabeza de ángel se apoyó en la más oscura mejilla de Maggie con muchos besos y algunas lágrimas. Más de un socio de la respetable empresa sentía cierta debilidad por aquellas niñas bonitas y esbeltas, y tal vez las preguntas inquietas de Lucy sobre sus pobres primos contribuyeron a que el tío Deane se diera prisa por encontrar a Tom un empleo temporal en el almacén y lo ayudara a tomar lecciones nocturnas de teneduría y cálculo.

Todo esto podría haber animado al muchacho y haber alimentado un poco sus esperanzas si no hubiera recibido al mismo tiempo el temido golpe de la noticia de que su padre, después de todo, sería declarado en bancarrota: en realidad, se pediría a los acreedores que no se cobraran toda la deuda, aunque para el inexperto Tom eso equivalía a la bancarrota. No sólo se diría que su padre había «perdido sus propiedade», si no que había «fracasad», palabra que suponía para Tom el mayor oprobio. Porque después de pagar las costas todavía quedaría la amistosa factura del señor Gore, el déficit en el banco y otras deudas, lo que reduciría los bienes a una desproporción inequívoca: «no más de diez o doce chelines por libr», predijo el señor Deane en tono decidido, apretando los labios; y las palabras cayeron sobre Tom como un líquido ardiente y le produjeron una herida mortificante.

Se encontraba tristemente necesitado de algo que lo animara un poco en la desagradable novedad de aquella situación: de repente, se había visto trasladado del fácil hastío alfombrado de las horas de estudio en casa del señor Stelling y las atareadas horas de ocio del último semestre, dedicadas a construir castillos en el aire, a la compañía de costales y pieles, hombres que se desgañitaban y depositaban con estrépito pesadas cargas junto a él. El primer paso para progresar en el mundo era un trabajo que le exigía permanecer en un lugar frío, polvoriento y ruidoso, y lo obligaba a prescindir del té y permanecer en Saint Ogg’s para recibir clases de un viejo oficinista manco en una habitación que olía intensamente a tabaco malo. El

rostro rosado y blanco de Tom tenía un tono apagado cuando se quitaba el sombrero en casa y se sentaba a cenar hambriento. No era de extrañar que, si Maggie o su madre le dirigían la palabra, se mostrara algo irritado.

No obstante, entre tanto la señora Tulliver daba vueltas a un plan gracias al cual ella, y sólo ella, podría evitar el más temible resultado e impedir que Wakem deseara pujar por el molino. Imaginad una gallina digna y respetable que, por alguna anomalía portentosa, se diera a la reflexión y a maquinar planes gracias a los cuales pudiera convencer al granjero de que no le retorciera el cuello o no la enviara al mercado con sus polluelos: el resultado difícilmente podría ser otro que un barullo de cacareos y aleteos. La señora Tulliver, al ver que todo iba mal, había empezado a pensar que había sido demasiado pasiva y que si se hubiera ocupado de los negocios y hubiera tomado de vez en cuando alguna decisión firme todo habría ido mucho mejor para ella y su familia. Al parecer, a nadie se le había ocurrido ir a hablar con Wakem sobre el asunto del molino y, sin embargo, reflexionaba la señora Tulliver, habría sido la vía más corta para llegar a buen puerto. Sin duda, habría sido inútil que fuera el señor Tulliver —suponiendo que pudiera y quisiera ir— porque él se había embarcado en el pleito contra Wakem y lo había insultado durante los últimos diez años: era probable que Wakem abrigara contra él algún resentimiento. Y ahora que la señora Tulliver había llegado a la conclusión de que su marido estaba muy equivocado al haberla llevado a ese conflicto, se sentía inclinada a pensar que su opinión sobre Wakem también era errónea. No cabía duda de que Wakem «había metido en la casa a los alguaciles y la había subastad», pero imaginaba que lo había hecho para agradar al hombre que había prestado el dinero al señor Tulliver, porque un abogado se veía obligado a contentar a muchos, y no era probable que apreciara demasiado al señor Tulliver, que había ido contra él en los tribunales. El abogado podría ser un hombre razonable —¿por qué no?—. Se había casado con la señorita Clint y cuando la señora Tulliver oyó hablar de esa boda, el verano en que llevaba aquella chaqueta de raso azul y todavía no pensaba en Tulliver, no había oído contar nada malo de Wakem. Y sin duda, era imposible que le mostrara otra cosa que buena voluntad —puesto que sabía que era una Dodson— en cuanto le dejara bien claro que ella nunca había querido pleitear, y lo cierto era que,

en aquel momento, estaba más dispuesta a aceptar los puntos de vista del señor Wakem que los de su esposo. En definitiva, si el abogado en cuestión veía a una respetable matrona como ella decidida a «conversar en buenos término» con él ¿por qué no iba a escuchar sus quejas? Ella le expondría el caso con claridad, cosa que todavía no había hecho nadie, y él no querría pujar por el molino con el propósito de fastidiarla, ya que era una mujer inocente; además, seguro que habían bailado juntos en su juventud en casa del señor de Darleigh, porque en aquellas grandes fiestas con frecuencia bailó con jóvenes cuyos nombres había olvidado.

La señora Tulliver guardó para sí estos razonamientos, ya que cuando insinuó al señor Deane y al señor Glegg que no le importaría ir a hablar con Wakem, le dijeron «No, no, n», «Bah, ba» y «Deje en paz a Wake» en un tono que indicaba que no deseaban prestar una atención imparcial a la exposición detallada de su proyecto. Aún menos se atrevió a mencionar el plan a Tom y a Maggie, porque «los niños estaban siempre en contra de lo que decía su madr» y veía que Tom sentía tanta antipatía hacia Wakem como su padre. Sin embargo, esta infrecuente concentración dio a la señora Tulliver una inusual capacidad de inventiva y de decisión, y un día o dos antes de que se celebrara la venta en *The Golden Lion*, cuando ya no quedaba tiempo que perder, llevó a cabo su plan mediante una estratagema. Tenía una gran cantidad de encurtidos y salsa de tomate en conserva y sin duda, el señor Hyndmarsh, el tendero, se los compraría si podían llegar a un acuerdo personalmente, de manera que propuso a Tom, ir caminando con él a Saint Ogg's aquella mañana; y cuando Tom insistió en que se olvidara de los encurtidos —no le gustaba que su madre anduviera por ahí—, se mostró tan ofendida por la conducta de su hijo, que le llevaba la contraria con los encurtidos que había preparado según la receta tradicional heredada de la abuela, fallecida cuando su madre era pequeña, que Tom cedió y caminaron juntos hasta que ella tomó por Danish Street, donde el señor Hyndmarsh vendía sus productos al por menor, no lejos de las oficinas del señor Wakem.

Dicho caballero todavía no había llegado a la oficina, pero ofrecieron asiento a la señora Tulliver junto al fuego, en su despacho privado, para esperarlo. No tuvo que aguardar mucho antes de que entrara el puntual

abogado, el cual frunció el ceño para examinar a la corpulenta mujer rubia que se puso en pie con cortés deferencia. Lector, todavía no conoces al señor Wakem y tal vez te preguntes si era un bribón de tal calibre y tan hábil e implacable enemigo de la humanidad honrada en general y del señor Tulliver en particular como aparecía en la imagen o el retrato que de él hemos visto en el pensamiento del molinero.

No cabe duda de que el irascible molinero era hombre tendente a interpretar cualquier disparo fortuito que pudiera rozarlo como un atentado deliberado contra su vida, y era propenso a perderse en conflictos en este enredoso mundo; y, puesto que era consciente de su propia infalibilidad, se hacía necesaria la hipótesis de la existencia de una mano diabólica para explicarlos. Con todo es posible creer que el abogado no fuera más culpable que cualquier máquina a la que, mientras trabaja regularmente, se le acerca demasiado un hombre osado, queda atrapado por algún engranaje y se convierte rápidamente en inesperadas salchichas.

No obstante, es imposible llegar a conclusión alguna con un somero vistazo: las líneas y las luces del rostro humano son como otros símbolos cualesquiera, y no siempre es fácil descifrarlos sin una clave. En una contemplación *a priori* de la nariz aguileña que tanto ofendía al señor Tulliver no se apreciaba más bribonería que en la forma de su cuello duro, aunque éste, junto con la nariz, podrían considerarse siniestros en cuanto se demostrara su condición de bribón.

—Así pues, ¿es usted la señora Tulliver? —preguntó el señor Wakem.

—Sí, señor. De soltera, Elizabeth Dodson.

—Haga el favor de sentarse. ¿Desea usted consultarme alguna cosa?

—Bueno, sí… —contestó la señora Tulliver, empezando a alarmarse de su intrepidez ahora que se encontraba en presencia que aquel hombre tan imponente, y advirtiendo que no había pensado en cómo debía comenzar. El señor Wakem se hurgó en los bolsillos del chaleco y la miró en silencio.

—Espero, señor… —dijo finalmente la señora Tulliver—… Espero que no piense que le guardo rencor porque mi marido ha perdido el pleito y los alguaciles han venido a casa y *s'*ha vendido la ropa ¡Ay de mí!… Yo me crié de otra manera. Estoy segura de que recordará usted a mi padre, porque era buen amigo del señor de Darleigh y siempre íbamos a sus bailes… A las

señoritas Dodson nos miraban más que a nadie… y con razón, porque éramos cuatro, y supongo que sabe que la señora Glegg y la señora Deane son hermanas mías. Y eso de pleitear, perder dinero, subastar lo tuyo antes de morir son cosas que nunca había visto antes de casarme ni tampoco durante muchos años después. Y yo no tengo la culpa de mi mala suerte por haber dejado a mi gente y haberme casado con el miembro de una familia con otra manera de hacer las cosas. Y no se *m'*ocurriría insultarle a usted como hacen otros, señor, nadie podrá decir eso de mí.

La señora Tulliver meneó un poco la cabeza y examinó el dobladillo de su pañuelo de bolsillo.

—No me cabe la menor duda de lo que me dice, señora Tulliver —contestó el señor Wakem con fría cortesía—. Pero ¿tiene usted alguna consulta que hacerme?

—Pues sí, señor. Pero es lo que yo me digo: usted tendrá sentimientos digo yo; y como mi marido lleva dos meses sin ser el mismo de antes… No crea que lo defiendo, de ninguna manera, por empeñarse tanto en lo del *riegadio*, pero no es un hombre malo, porque nunca se ha quedado con un chelín o un penique de otro como no fuera por error, y si es muy orgulloso y dado a los pleitos, ¿qué le voy a hacer? Y tuvo un ataque que quedó como muerto cuando llegó la carta que decía que usted tenía poder de decisión sobre las tierras… pero estoy segura de que usted se comportará como un caballero.

—¿Qué quiere decir con todo esto, señora Tulliver? —preguntó el señor Wakem con cierta brusquedad—. ¿Qué es lo que quiere preguntarme?

—Bien, señor, si usted fuera tan bueno… —dijo la señora Tulliver, un poco sobresaltada y hablando más deprisa— si usted fuera tan bueno como para no comprar el molino y la tierra… En realidad, la tierra no importaría mucho, pero mi marido se volverá loco si se la queda usted.

Algo parecido a una idea nueva recorrió el rostro del señor Wakem.

—¿Quién le ha dicho que yo tenía intención de comprar?

—Vaya, señor, no me lo invento, y nunca se *m*'habría ocurrido, ya que mi marido, que algo sabe de leyes, siempre decía que los abogados nunca necesitan comprar nada, ni tierras ni casas, porque siempre llegan a sus

manos de otros modos. Pensaba que usted también lo hacía así y nunca dije lo contrario.

—Ah, entonces, ¿quién lo dijo? —preguntó Wakem, abriendo el escritorio y cambiando las cosas de sitio mientras se acompañaba de un silbido casi inaudible.

—Caramba, pues fueron el señor Glegg y el señor Deane, que se encargan de todo: y el señor Deane piensa que Guest & Co. podría comprar el molino y dejar que el señor Tulliver trabajara en él para ellos si usted no pujara y elevara el precio. Y para mi marido sería tan importante quedarse donde está, si pudiera ganarse la vida: porque fue de su padre, el molino, quiero decir, y lo construyó su abuelo, aunque a mí no me gustaba el ruido que hacía, de recién casada, porque en nuestra familia, en los Dodson, no había molinos, y si hubiera sabido que los molinos tenían tanto que ver con la ley, no habría sido yo la primera Dodson en casarse con un molinero; pero me metí a ciegas en esto, así fue, en lo del *riegadío* y todo lo demás.

—Vaya, ¿así que Guest & Co. se quedaría con el molino y pagaría un salario a su esposo?

—Ah, señor, qué pena pensar en que mi marido tenga que vivir de un sueldo —dijo la pobre señora Tulliver con una lagrimilla—. Pero, al menos, si nos quedáramos en el molino, todo se parecería a como era antes. Y si a usted se *l'*ocurriera pujar por el molino y comprarlo, mi marido podría sufrir otro ataque peor y no recuperarse nunca.

—¿Y si compro el molino y permito a su marido que se encargue de él? ¿Entonces, qué pasaría? —preguntó el señor Wakem.

—Oh, señor, creo que sería imposible convencerlo, ni que el mismo molino se lo pidiera de rodillas, porque su nombre es para él como un veneno, lo considera culpable de su ruina desde que usted le echó la ley por encima por la carretera del prado: eso fue hace ocho años y desde entonces va a más, aunque yo siempre le he dicho que estaba equivocado…

—¡Es un imbécil testarudo y calumniador! —estalló el señor Wakem, perdiendo la calma.

—¡Oh, señor! —dijo la señora Tulliver, asustada ante aquel resultado, tan distinto del esperado—. No desearía llevarle la contraria, pero es muy probable que cambie de opinión con esta enfermedad, ya que ha olvidado

muchas cosas. Y si muriera no desearía cargar usted, con el peso de un cadáver; y de veras que dicen que trae mala suerte que el molino de Dorlcote cambie de manos, porque podría quedarse sin agua y entonces… no es que le desee mala suerte, señor, porque había olvidado decirle que recordaba su boda como si fuera ayer: la señora Wakem era la señorita Clint de soltera, lo recuerdo muy bien, y *m'*hijo, y no hay otro mejor, mas guapo ni más honrado, ha estudiado con el suyo…

El señor Wakem se puso en pie, abrió la puerta y llamó a uno de sus empleados.

—Disculpe que la interrumpa, señora Tulliver, pero tengo mucho trabajo que atender y creo que ya no tenemos nada más que decirnos.

—Pero si usted quisiera tener en cuenta lo que le he dicho y no ir contra mí ni contra mis hijos… —dijo la señora Tulliver poniéndose en pie—. No niego que el señor Tulliver *s'*ha equivocado, pero ya ha sufrido suficiente castigo, y hay hombres peores… Su mayor defecto ha sido la generosidad… Al fin y al cabo él sólo se ha hecho daño a sí mismo y a su familia ¡Qué pena! Y cuando miro los estantes vacíos cada día y pienso que allí estaban mis cosas…

—Sí, lo tendré en cuenta —contestó el señor Wakem rápidamente mirando hacia la puerta abierta.

—Por favor, no diga a nadie que he venido a hablar con usted, porque mi hijo se enfadaría mucho conmigo por rebajarme así, estoy segura, y ya tengo suficientes problemas para que me regañen los hijos.

La voz de la pobre señora Tulliver temblaba un poco y fue incapaz de contestar al «Que tenga usted un buen día» del abogado con más que una pequeña inclinación, tras la cual se alejó en silencio.

—¿Cuándo se subasta el molino de Dorlcote? ¿Dónde están los papeles? —preguntó el señor Wakem al empleado en cuanto estuvieron solos.

—El próximo viernes: el viernes a las seis.

—Corra a casa de Winship, el subastador, y mire si está allí. Tengo que tratar un asunto con él: dígale que venga.

Aunque cuando el señor Wakem había entrado aquella mañana en la oficina no tenía intención de comprar el molino de Dorlcote, había tomado

ya una decisión: la señora Tulliver le había sugerido varios motivos decisivos y Wakem pensaba muy deprisa: era uno de esos hombres que pueden apresurarse sin por ello precipitarse, ya que sus motivos siguen siempre los mismos razonamientos y no tienen necesidad de conciliar distintos objetivos.

Imaginar que Wakem sentía hacia Tulliver el mismo odio inveterado que éste tenía por él sería como suponer que un lucio y un gobio pueden mirarse a la cara. El gobio, como es natural, aborrece el modo en que se alimenta el lucio, y es probable que el lucio se limite a pensar incluso del más irritado gobio que constituye un plato excelente: a menos que se atragante con él, es difícil que sienta alguna antipatía personal. Si el señor Tulliver hubiera ofendido u obstaculizado los deseos del abogado, tal vez éste lo habría distinguido como objeto de su venganza. Pero cuando el señor Tulliver llamaba bribón a Wakem en la mesa de la comida del mercado, los clientes del abogado no pensaban ni por un momento en retirarle sus negocios; y si cuando el propio Wakem se hallaba presente, algún bromista criador de ganado, estimulado por la oportunidad y el *brandy*, le lanzaba alguna pulla mencionando testamentos y ancianas, él conservaba toda la sangre fría, consciente de que la mavoría de los hombres de cierta importancia que se hallaban presentes sabían que «Wakem era Wake»: es decir, un hombre que conocía bien las piedras pasaderas que le permitían cruzar terrenos fangosos Es probable que un hombre que había amasado una gran fortuna poseía una hermosa casa entre árboles en Tofton y la mejor bodega de oporto de todo Saint Ogg’s se sintiera a la altura de su reputación. Y es muy probable que incluso el honrado señor Tulliver, a pesar de que consideraba que la ley era poco más que una gallera, no hubiera llegado, en otras circunstancias, a considerar adecuada la afirmación de que «Wakem era Wake»; pues tal como me han enseñado algunas personas versadas en historia, la humanidad no está dispuesta a juzgar con severidad la conducta de los grandes vencedores cuando su victoria se halla en lado adecuado. Así pues, Tulliver no podía ser obstáculo para Wakem: por el contrario, era un pobre diablo al cual el abogado había derrotado en varias ocasiones: un individuo irascible que no paraba de tirar piedras sobre su propio tejado. Wakem no tenía la conciencia intranquila

por haber utilizado algunas artimañas contra el molinero, así pues, ¿por qué iba a odiar a aquel demandante, ese lamentable toro furioso enmarañado en una red?

Sin embargo, entre los diversos excesos a los que puede entregarse la naturaleza humana, los moralistas nunca han mencionado el de sentir un aprecio excesivo por las personas que nos vilipendian abiertamente. El victorioso candidato Amarillo de la población de Old Topping tal vez no sienta adecuado odio hacia el Azul que consuela a sus partidarios con una retórica vituperante contra los Amarillos que vendieron su país y constituyen los demonios de su vida privada; pero no lamentaría, si la ley y la oportunidad lo permitieran, dar patadas en la espinilla a un director de periódico Azul hasta dejársela de un tono más vivo que su color favorito. Los hombres prósperos disfrutan con alguna pequeña venganza de vez en cuando, a modo de entretenimiento, cuando se les cruza en su camino y no obstaculiza sus asuntos, y estas pequeñas venganzas —que abarcan todos los grados de las ofensas desagradables— tienen un enorme efecto sobre la vida, ahuyentan a los hombres preparados y deshonran a terceros con conversaciones banales. Es más, es probable que contemplar cómo humillamos sin especial esfuerzo a aquellos que nos han ofendido levemente tenga un efecto balsámico y halagador. Al parecer, la Providencia o cualquier otro poder terrenal ha hecho suya la tarea de recompensarnos; y efectivamente gracias a una agradable disposición de las cosas, resulta que de un modo u otro nuestros enemigos no prosperan.

Wakem albergaba un latente deseo de venganza contra aquel desatento molinero y ahora que la señora Tulliver le había dado la idea le resultaba placentero hacer exactamente aquello que provocaría en el señor Tulliver una mortificación infalible y resultaría para él un placer refinado que no era mero producto de la maldad, sino que se mezclaba con la buena conciencia. Produce cierta satisfacción ver a un enemigo humillado, pero eso es poco en comparación con la que proporciona verlo humillado por nuestra benevolencia. Esa clase de venganza pertenece al terreno de las virtudes, y Wakem tenía la intención de no salirse de éste. En una ocasión se dio el gusto de ingresar a un viejo enemigo en una de las casas para pobres de Saint Ogg’s, cuya reconstrucción había sufragado generosamente; y aquí

tenía la oportunidad de ocuparse de otro convirtiéndolo en criado suyo. Tales detalles suponen un complemento para la prosperidad y son mucho más agradables que la venganza que ofende directamente. Y Tulliver, con su tosca lengua lastrada por la obligación, sería mejor empleado que cualquier otro individuo que le rogara un empleo gorra en mano. Tulliver era tenido por un hombre orgulloso de su honradez y Wakem era demasiado perspicaz para no creer en la existencia de ésta. Tendía a observar a la gente, no a juzgarla de acuerdo con algún patrón, y sabía mejor que nadie que todos los hombres no eran como él. Además, tenía intención de controlar de cerca el negocio de la tierra y del molino: le gustaban estos asuntos rurales. Sin embargo, no sólo la posibilidad de ejercer una benévola venganza lo empujaba a comprar el molino de Dorlcote. Era una buena inversión de capital y, además, Guest & Co. tenían intención de pujar. El señor Guest y el señor Wakem mantenían una relación social cordial, comían juntos en alguna ocasión, y al abogado le gustaba imponerse sobre el armador y fabricante, demasiado estridente en sus negocios y en su conversación de sobremesa. Wakem no era un simple hombre de negocios: en los círculos más altos de Saint Ogg's se le consideraba un individuo agradable, tenía una conversación amena ante una copa de oporto, era algo aficionado al cultivo de la tierra y, sin duda, había sido un excelente esposo y padre: en la iglesia, cuando acudía, se sentaba bajo la más hermosa lápida conmemorativa, dedicada a la memoria de su esposa. En las mismas circunstancias, cualquier hombre se habría casado de nuevo, pero se decía que era más cariñoso con su hijo deforme que la mayoría de los hombres con sus hijos mejor plantados. Lo cierto era que el señor Wakem también tenía otros hijos, si bien la relación parental era más difusa, y aunque se ocupaba de mantenerlos, les proporcionaba un nivel de vida adecuadamente inferior al suyo. Ahí radicaba, en realidad, el motivo principal para la compra del molino de Dorlcote: mientras la señora Tulliver hablaba, al rápido abogado se le había ocurrido que, entre todas las demás circunstancias del caso, aquella compra podría servir para que pasados pocos años proporcionara una posición adecuada a un muchacho especial que tenía intención de lanzar al mundo.

La señora Tulliver se había propuesto influir en ese modo de pensar y había fracasado: hecho que puede ilustrarse con la observación de un gran filósofo, según la cual los pescadores fracasan cuando preparan el cebo porque desconocen el modo en que razonan los peces.

Capítulo VIII

Cae la luz sobre las ruinas

Un gélido y claro día de enero, el señor Tulliver bajó por primera vez al piso inferior: el brillante sol que daba sobre las ramas del castaño y los tejados que veía por la ventana le hicieron declarar con impaciencia que no quería seguir encerrado; creía que, con aquel sol, cualquier otro lugar sería más alegre que su dormitorio, porque no sabía nada de la desnudez de la planta baja, en la que la luz solar resultaba inoportuna, como si ésta experimentara el despiadado placer de mostrar los lugares vacíos y las marcas que quedaban allí donde antes se encontraban los objetos familiares. En su conversación resultaba evidente que seguía creyendo que había recibido la víspera la carta del señor Gore, y los intentos de trasmitirle la idea de que desde entonces habían transcurrido muchas semanas fracasaban ante una desmemoria recurrente, hasta tal punto que el doctor Turnbull había empezado a renunciar a la idea de ir familiarizándolo con los acontecimientos. Sólo podría llegar a comprender por completo el presente poco a poco y mediante nuevas experiencias, ya que las palabras eran más débiles que las impresiones dejadas por los acontecimientos antiguos. Su esposa y sus hijos oyeron con un estremecimiento su decisión de bajar al piso inferior. La señora Tulliver pidió a Tom que no fuera a Saint Ogg's a la hora habitual, sino que esperara a ver a su padre en la planta baja: y Tom obedeció, aunque se estremecía al imaginar la dolorosa escena. Durante los últimos días los tres se habían sentido más abatidos que nunca: Guest & Co. no había comprado el molino: la subasta había adjudicado a Wakem el

molino y las tierras, y éste se había presentado en el lugar y había manifestado delante del señor Deane y el señor Glegg, y en presencia de la señora Tulliver, su intención de contratar a Tulliver como encargado del negocio en caso de que éste se recuperara. La familia había discutido mucho esta proposición. Los tíos y las tías coincidían de modo casi unánime en que no se podía rechazar, ya que el único obstáculo eran los sentimientos que albergaba la mente del señor Tulliver y, puesto que los tíos no los compartían, los consideraban irracionales e infantiles; en realidad, les parecía que Tulliver transfería a Wakem la indignación y el odio que debería sentir hacia sí mismo por su belicosidad y el modo en que la manifestaba pleiteando. Así el señor Tulliver tendría la oportunidad de mantener a su esposa y a su hija sin ninguna ayuda de los parientes de ésta y sin experimentar un descenso demasiado evidente hacia la pobreza, ya que para las personas respetables resulta muy violento encontrarse con un pariente pobre al borde del camino. La señora Glegg consideraba que cuando recuperara la razón, Tulliver debería comprender que no podría nunca humillarse bastante: al final, había sucedido lo que ella siempre dijo como resultado de su insolencia «con ellos, que eran las amistades que más debería cuida». El señor Glegg y el señor Deane eran menos inflexibles, pero ambos pensaban que Tulliver ya había hecho daño suficiente con sus malhumoradas manías y que debería dejarlos al margen en cuanto le ofrecían un medio de vida. Wakem estaba comportándose correctamente y no parecía guardar ningún resentimiento hacia Tulliver. Tom se negó a considerar siquiera la proposición: no le gustaba la idea de que su padre fuera subordinado de Wakem; le parecía mezquino. En cambio, la mayor inquietud de su madre era la total imposibilidad de «hacer cambiar de opinión al señor Tulliver sobre Wake» o conseguir que atendiera a razones: no, tendrían que irse a vivir a una pocilga a propósito para fastidiar a Wakem, el cual hablaba con tanta justicia como el que más. En realidad, la señora Tulliver estaba tan confusa por tener que vivir en aquella extraña situación de tristeza incomprensible —de la que no dejaba de lamentarse diciendo: «Madre mía, ¿qué he hecho yo para merecer peor suerte que otras mujeres?»— que Maggie empezó a pensar que su pobre madre estaba perdiendo la razón.

—Tom —dijo Maggie cuando estuvieron fuera de la habitación de su padre—, tenemos que intentar por todos los medios que padre comprenda un poco lo que ha sucedido antes de bajar. Pero debemos alejar a madre: seguro que dice algo que lo estropea todo. Pídele a Kezia que la entretenga abajo con algo en la cocina.

Kezia estaba a la altura de las circunstancias. Tras declarar su intención de quedarse «con sueldo o sin sueld» hasta que el señor estuviera de nuevo en pie, encontraba cierta compensación tratando con mano dura a su señora, regañándola por dar vueltas por ahí aturdida y pasar el día sin cambiarse de cofia y con una actitud tan «chafad». Aquellos momentos de inquietud eran para Kezia como unas saturnalias en las que podía regañar a su ama sin restricciones. En aquella ocasión en concreto, había que recoger la ropa tendida y Kezia manifestó su deseo de saber si un par de manos bastaba para hacerlo todo, dentro y fuera, y señalo que le habría parecido buena idea que la señora Tulliver se pusiera el sombrero y tomara un poco de aire fresco realizando ese trabajo tan útil. La pobre señora Tulliver bajó las escaleras con docilidad: que la regañara la criada era el último vestigio de su dignidad doméstica. Pronto ni siquiera tendría criada que la riñera.

El señor Tulliver descansaba en una butaca tras fatigarse vistiéndose, y Maggie y Tom estaban sentados junto a él cuando Luke entró para preguntar si ayudaba al señor a bajar las escaleras.

—Sí, sí. Luke, espera un poco, siéntate —dijo el señor Tulliver, señalando una silla con el bastón y siguiéndolo con la mirada, con esa expresión que con frecuencia tienen los convalecientes cuando miran a las personas que los han cuidado, similar a la de un niño pequeño cuando busca con los ojos a su niñera. Y Luke había velado con constancia a su amo durante las noches.

—¿Cómo está el agua, Luke? —preguntó el señor Tulliver—. ¿Dix ha vuelto a quitártela?

—No, señor. Todo va bien.

—No creo que se dé prisa en hacerlo, ahora que Riley ha acabado con eso. Eso fue lo que le dije a Riley ayer… le dije…

El señor Tulliver se inclinó hacia delante, apoyando los codos sobre los brazos del sillón, con la vista clavada en el suelo como si buscara algo, de la

misma manera que un hombre que lucha contra el sueño intenta captar imágenes fugaces. Maggie miró a Tom con muda expresión de abatimiento: la mente de su padre estaba tan alejada del presente… A Tom le faltaba poco para salir corriendo, con esa incapacidad para soportar la emoción que constituye una de las diferencias entre un muchacho y una muchacha, entre un hombre y una mujer.

—Padre —dijo Maggie, poniendo una mano sobre la suya—. ¿No recuerda que el señor Riley murió?

—¿Se murió? —contestó el señor Tulliver bruscamente, mirándola a la cara con una extraña expresión escrutadora.

—Sí, murió de una apoplejía hace casi un año; recuerdo que dijo usted que tendría que pagar algún dinero en su nombre, y dejó a sus hijas en muy mala situación: una de ellas es ayudante en el colegio de la señorita Firniss, donde he estado estudiando, ya lo sabe.

—Ah, ¿sí? —dijo su padre con aire de duda, sin dejar de mirarla, pero en cuanto Tom empezó a hablar, volvió los ojos hacia él con la misma mirada interrogadora, como si le sorprendiera sobremanera la presencia de aquellos jóvenes. Siempre que su mente se perdía en el pasado lejano, olvidaba sus rostros: ya no eran los del niño y la mocita de aquellos tiempos.

—Hace ya mucho tiempo de la pelea con Dix, padre —dijo Tom—. Recuerdo que habló usted de ello hace unos tres años, antes de que fuera a estudiar a casa del señor Stelling. He estado estudiando allí tres años, ¿no lo recuerda?

El señor Tulliver se recostó en el asiento de nuevo y su mirada perdió el aspecto infantil bajo una avalancha de ideas nuevas que lo distrajeron de las impresiones externas.

—Sí, sí —dijo al cabo de un par de minutos—. Pagué mucho dinero… Decidí que mi hijo tuviera cultura y una buena educación: yo no *l'*he tenido y l'he echado de menos. Y así no necesitará otra fortuna: es lo que yo digo… Si Wakem tenía que ganarme otra vez la partida…

Al pensar en Wakem se animó y, tras una pausa, empezó a mirar la chaqueta que llevaba puesta y a palpar el bolsillo lateral. Se volvió hacia Tom y le preguntó con su brusquedad habitual en otro tiempo:

—¿Dónde han puesto la carta de Gore?

Estaba en un cajón cercano, ya que la pedía con cierta frecuencia.

—¿Sabe lo que dice la carta, padre? —preguntó Tom, mientras se la tendía.

—Claro que sí —contestó el señor Tulliver con cierto enfado—. ¿Y qué más da? Si a Furley no le interesa la propiedad, entonces será otro: hay más gente en el mundo. Pero es muy molesto que no *m*'encuentre bien: ve a decirles que enganchen el caballo al coche, Luke: podré ir yo mismo a Saint Ogg's, Gore me espera.

—¡No, padre! —exclamó Maggie con tono suplicante Hace va mucho tiempo de esto: lleva usted muchas semanas enfermo, más de dos meses: todo ha cambiado.

El señor Tulliver los miró a los tres alternativamente con expresión de asombro en otras ocasiones la idea de que habían ocurrido cosas que él ignoraba lo había detenido momentáneamente, pero ahora le parecía una novedad completa.

—Sí, padre —dijo Tom en respuesta a la mirada—. No necesita preocuparse por los negocios hasta que esté bien: por ahora todo lo relacionado con el molino, las tierras y las deudas está arreglado.

—Entonces, ¿qué es lo que está arreglado? —preguntó su padre con enfado.

—No se lo tome muy a pecho, señor —dijo Luke—. De haber podido, *usté* habría *pagao* a todo el mundo; eso le dije al señorito Tom: *usté* habría *pagao* a todos.

El bueno de Luke sentía, como sienten los hombres satisfechos de haber dedicado toda su vida a servir, que el sistema de clases era adecuado y natural, de modo que la ruina de su amo constituía una tragedia también para él. A su lenta manera, se sentía empujado a decir algo que expresara su participación en las penas de la familia, y esas palabras, que había repetido una y otra vez a Tom cuando no quería aceptar que le devolviera las cincuenta libras de su dinero, aparecían una y otra vez. Eran las más adecuadas para alterar el inquieto espíritu de su amo.

—¿Pagar a todo el mundo? —dijo con vehemente agitación mientras enrojecía y lanzaba chispas por los ojos—. ¿Por qué…? ¿Cómo…? ¿Me han

declarado en bancarrota?

—¡Oh, padre, querido padre! —exclamó Maggie, convencida de que esa terrible palabra representaba la realidad—. Tiene que soportarlo… nosotros le queremos… sus hijos siempre le querrán… Tom pagará a todo el mundo… dice que lo hará cuando sea mayor.

Advirtió que su padre se echaba a temblar; le tembló la voz cuando dijo, transcurridos unos momentos:

—Sí, mocita, pero yo no viviré dos veces.

—Pero tal vez viva usted para ver como pago a todos, padre —se esforzó Tom en decir.

—Ah, hijo mío —dijo el señor Tulliver, negando lentamente con la cabeza—, lo que está roto, roto está: será obra tuya, no mía. —Después, alzando la vista, añadió—: Sólo tienes dieciséis años, es una tarea muy dura para ti, pero no debes reprochárselo a tu padre: he tenido que luchar contra demasiados bribones. *T'*he dado una buena educación: eso te servirá para empezar.

Estas últimas palabras se le trabaron en la garganta; pasó el sofoco que alarmó a sus hijos, porque con frecuencia precedía a la parálisis, y quedó pálido y tembloroso. Tom no dijo nada; seguía combatiendo los deseos de marcharse corriendo. Su padre permaneció en silencio durante unos minutos, pero no parecía tener la cabeza perdida.

—Entonces, ¿han subastado todo lo que tengo? —preguntó con más calma, como si lo empujara el mero deseo de saber.

—Lo han subastado todo, padre; pero todavía no sabemos qué ha pasado exactamente con el molino y la tierra —dijo Tom, deseoso de evitar cualquier pregunta que condujera al hecho de que el comprador era Wakem.

—Padre, no se sorprenda si abajo ve la sala muy vacía —dijo Maggie —. Pero ahí están su butaca y su escritorio, ahí siguen.

—Vamos. Ayúdame a bajar, Luke. Iré a verlo todo —dijo el señor Tulliver, apoyándose en el bastón y tendiendo la otra mano hacia Luke.

—Sí, señor —dijo Luke mientras le tendía el brazo a su señor—. Se hará mejor idea cuando lo vea todo: *s'*acostumbrará. Eso es lo que dice mi madre de que le falte el resuello: ahora *s'*ha acostumbrao, aunque al principio le fastidiaba.

Maggie se adelantó rápidamente para ver si todo estaba bien en el lóbrego salón donde el fuego, amortiguado por la gélida luz solar, parecía formar parte de la desolación general. Giró la butaca de su padre y apartó la mesilla para dejarle el paso expedito y se quedó aguardando, con el corazón latiéndole a toda prisa, el momento en que entrara y mirara por primera vez. Tom pasó primero, llevando un escabel para la pierna, y se detuvo junto a Maggie, frente a la chimenea. El dolor de Tom era más puro que el de Maggie; ésta, aunque era vivamente vulnerable, en cierto modo sentía que la pena le dejaba más espacio para que fluyera el amor y eso permitía respirar a su naturaleza apasionada. Los chicos no sienten estas cosas: prefieren matar al león de Nemea o llevar a cabo tareas heroicas que sufrir por males que no les permiten actuar.

El señor Tulliver entró y se detuvo junto a la puerta, apoyado en Luke, para mirar a su alrededor todos los lugares desnudos ocupados por las sombras de los objetos ausentes, compañeros cotidianos de toda su vida. El esfuerzo pareció renovarle las facultades.

—¡Ah! —exclamó lentamente mientras avanzaba hacia la butaca—. Lo han subastado todo… lo han subastado todo.

Después, tras sentarse y dejar el bastón, miró otra vez a su alrededor mientras Luke salía de la habitación.

—Han dejado la gran Biblia —observó—. En ella está todo apuntado: el día en que nací y el día en que me casé.

Abrieron ante el señor Tulliver la Biblia en cuarto por las guardas y mientras leía lentamente, entró en la sala la señora Tulliver, pero se quedó muda de sorpresa al ver a su marido en el salón con la gran Biblia delante.

—¡Ah! —exclamó él, mirando el lugar donde tenía el dedo—. Mi madre se llamaba Margaret Beaton, murió a los cuarenta y siete años: la suya no era una familia longeva. Gritty y yo somos sus hijos y no tardaremos mucho en descansar eternamente.

Pareció detenerse sobre los datos que se referían al nacimiento y el matrimonio de su hermana, como si le sugirieran nuevas ideas: de repente, alzó los ojos hacia Tom.

—¿Han ido a pedirle a Moss el dinero que le presté? —preguntó alarmado.

—No, padre —contestó Tom—. Quemamos el pagaré. El señor Tulliver volvió los ojos hacia la página.

Ah… Elizabeth Dodson… hace dieciocho años que me casé con ella…

—Se cumplirán el próximo día de la Virgen —precisó la señora Tulliver, acercándose y mirando la página.

Su marido la miró con expresión seria.

—¡Pobre Bessy! —dijo—. Eras muy bonita entonces, todo el mundo lo decía, y yo pensaba que era extraño que te conservaras tan bien. Pero ahora has envejecido mucho… no me lo reproches… Yo quería ser bueno contigo… Prometimos amarnos en la riqueza y en la pobreza…

—Pero nunca creí que lo malo seria tan malo —contestó la señora Tulliver con la expresión extraña y asustada que tenía últimamente—. Y mi pobre padre *m'*entregó en matrimonio… para encontrarme con esto de repente…

—Oh, madre —protestó Maggie—: no hable así.

—No, ya sé que no dejaréis que hable vuestra madre… Ha sido siempre así, durante toda la vida… Vuestro padre no hacía caso de lo que yo decía… No *m'*habría servido de nada rogar y llorar… Como tampoco me serviría ahora, aunque *m'*arrodillara…

—No digas eso, Bessy —contestó el señor Tulliver, cuyo orgullo, en aquellos primeros momentos de humillación, se encontraba en suspenso y podía entender que el reproche de su esposa no carecía de fundamento. Si todavía hay alguna manera de enmendarlo, no diré que no.

—Entonces, quedémonos aquí trabajando, así podré estar con mis hermanas… Yo que siempre he sido tan buena esposa y nunca *t'*he contrariado… Todos lo dicen… Dicen que sería muy justo… pero tú le tienes tanta manía a Wakem…

—Madre —intervino Tom con severidad—: éste no es momento para hablar de eso.

—Déjala —dijo el señor Tulliver—: di lo que tengas que decir, Bessy. Vaya, ahora que el molino y la tierra son de Wakem y todo está en sus manos, ¿de qué sirve que *t'*enfrentes a él? Si él dice que puedes quedarte y habla con tanta justicia, y dice que puedes encargarte del negocio y ganar treinta chelines a la semana y tener un caballo para ir al mercado… ¿Y

dónde vamos a quedarnos? Tendremos que ir a una de las casitas del pueblo… Tener que verme así con mis hijos… Y todo porque te empecinas en ir en contra de la gente y nada te hace cambiar *d'*opinión.

El señor Tulliver temblaba, hundido de nuevo en la butaca.

—Haz lo que quieras conmigo, Bessy —murmuró—. Te he arrastrado a la pobreza… Este mundo es demasiado para mí… Estoy en la ruina… Ya no tengo nada que defender…

—Padre —dijo Tom—, no estoy de acuerdo con madre ni con los tíos y no creo que usted deba verse sometido a Wakem. Ahora gano una libra por semana y cuando esté bueno usted podrá encontrar algún trabajo.

—Calla, Tom, calla: ya es suficiente por hoy. Dame un beso, Bessy, y no nos guardemos rencor: ya nunca volveremos a ser jóvenes… este mundo es demasiado para mí.

Capítulo IX

Un nuevo dato en el registro familiar

Tras ese primer momento de renuncia y sumisión, el molinero pasó por días de violenta lucha interior a medida que la recuperación gradual de sus fuerzas traía consigo una capacidad mayor para abarcar todas las facetas del conflicto en que se encontraba. Los miembros débiles se resignan con facilidad al encadenamiento, y cuando la enfermedad nos domina, parece posible cumplir promesas que rompe la vieja energía al regresar. En algunas ocasiones, el pobre Tulliver pensaba que era demasiado duro para la naturaleza humana cumplir la promesa hecha a Bessy: había accedido antes de saber lo que iba a pedirle: de la misma manera podría haberle hecho prometer que cargaría con una tonelada. Sin embargo, Bessy tenía a su favor demasiados sentimientos, no sólo la conciencia de que, como resultado de su matrimonio, había llevado una vida muy dura. Tulliver pensó en la posibilidad de ahorrar dinero de su salario, con muchos esfuerzos, para pagar un segundo dividendo a los acreedores, pero no le sería fácil conseguir un trabajo adecuado para él. Hasta la fecha, había llevado una vida regalada, mandando mucho y trabajando poco, y no estaba preparado para otra clase de empleo. Tal vez debería emplearse como jornalero y su esposa podría recibir ayuda de sus hermanas, aunque esa perspectiva le resultaba doblemente amarga, especialmente después de que hubieran permitido la venta de todos los objetos preciosos de Bessy, probablemente porque querían ponerla en su contra y hacerle sentir que era él quien la había llevado a esa situación. Cuando se presentaron para insistir

en lo que tenía que hacer por la pobre Bessy, escuchó sus reconvenciones sin mirarlos más que de reojo y cuando estaban de espaldas. Sólo el temor de necesitar su ayuda había hecho que aceptar su consejo fuera la alternativa más sencilla.

Pero el argumento de mayor peso era el amor al lugar por donde había correteado de pequeño, igual que Tom lo hizo años más tarde. Los Tulliver habían vivido allí durante varias generaciones, y cuando era pequeño durante las noches de invierno permanecía sentado en un escabel mientras su padre le contaba la historia del viejo molino de madera que se alzaba allí antes de que las últimas grandes inundaciones lo dañaran tanto que su abuelo lo echó abajo y construyó otro nuevo. Cuando Tulliver pudo caminar otra vez y contemplar los viejos objetos, sintió la fuerza de un afecto que lo ataba a su hogar como parte de su vida, parte de sí mismo. No podía soportar la idea de tener que vivir en otro sitio que aquel, donde conocía el ruido de cada puerta y portón, sentía que la forma y el color de cada tejado y de cada mancha producida por el tiempo, de cada montículo truncado, eran los adecuados porque sus sentidos se habían nutrido de ellos. Nuestra clase ociosa ilustrada, que apenas tiene tiempo que perder entre los setos, huye rápidamente hacia los trópicos y se encuentra en su casa entre palmeras y bananos, que se alimenta de libros de viajes y ensancha el teatro de su imaginación hasta el Zambeze, difícilmente puede concebir lo que un hombre a la antigua como Tulliver podía sentir por el lugar que era centro de todos sus recuerdos y donde la vida parecía una herramienta familiar, adaptada a la mano por el uso, en la que los dedos encajan con amorosa facilidad. Y, en aquellos momentos, Tulliver vivía en el recuerdo de tiempos lejanos que acostumbra a asaltarnos en las horas pasivas de da convalecencia.

—Mira, Luke —dijo una tarde, mientras miraba sobre la valla del huerto—. Recuerdo el día en que plantaron esos árboles. A mi padre *l'*entusiasmaba plantar, para él era una fiesta traer un carro lleno *d'*arbolitos, y yo me quedaba con él al aire libre, siguiéndolo como un perro.

Se dio media vuelta y, apoyándose en el pilar de la verja, miró hacia las construcciones que tenía ante sí.

—Creo que el viejo molino *m'*echaría de menos, Luke. Según cuenta una vieja historia, el río se enfada cuando el molino cambia de manos: se *l'*oí contar a mi padre muchas veces. Quién sabe si *l'*historia tendrá algo de cierto, porque este mundo es un lugar muy enredoso y el viejo Pero Botero siempre anda metido en él: todo esto es demasiado para mí.

—Pues sí, señor —dijo Luke con comprensión tranquilizadora—: la *verdá* es que con la roya del grano, el fuego de los almiares y otras cosas que he visto yo mismo, muchas veces pasan cosas raras: el tocino de nuestro último cerdo se funde como si fuera mantequilla, no deja más que un chicharrón.

—Es como si fuera ayer mismo cuando mi padre empezó a hacer malta —prosiguió el señor Tulliver—. Recuerdo el día en que terminaron la caseta para maltear, y pensé que de allí iba a salir algo importante, porque aquel día comimos budín de ciruelas e hicimos una fiestecita, y pregunté a mi madre, que era una mujer delicada de ojos negros… La mocita se le parecerá como una gota a otra… —Llegado a este punto, el señor Tulliver se puso el bastón entre las piernas y sacó la cajita de rapé para disfrutar mejor de la anécdota, que iba desgranando poco a poco, como si de vez en cuando perdiera de vista la narración que deseaba contar—. Entonces yo era un niño pequeño, poco más alto que la rodilla de mi madre, que nos quería muchísimo, y yo le pregunté: «Madre, ahora que tenemos la casita para maltear, ¿comeremos budín de ciruelas cada día?». *L'*hizo tanta gracia que me lo contó una y otra vez hasta el día de su muerte. Murió joven, mi madre. Pero hace ya sus buenos cuarenta años que se construyó la casita de maltear y son pocos los días que no ha sido lo primero que he mirado al levantarme, año tras otro, en todas las estaciones. En otro sitio me volvería loco, me sentiría perdido. Es muy duro, lo mires como lo mires, me irritará cargar con un yugo, pero prefiero seguir por el viejo camino en lugar de tomar otro nuevo.

—Sí, señor: aquí estará mejor que en cualquier otro *lao* —contestó Luke—. Yo no aguantaría tener que trabajar en otro sitio: todo es distinto: lo mismo los carros tienen las ruedas estrechas, las escaleras son distintas o son distintas las galletas de avena, como aquí mismo, Floss arriba. No es bueno cambiar de lugar.

—Imagino que querrán echar a Ben y hacer que te las apañes con un chico, y tendré que ayudar un poco. Tendrás peor empleo.

—No importa, señor —dijo Luke—, no pienso amargarme. He estado con *usté* veinte años, y veinte años no pasan porque uno quiera, igual que uno no puede hacer crecer los árboles: uno debe esperar a que nuestro Señor los envíe. Yo no me acostumbro a las nuevas comidas ni a las nuevas caras. No soy capaz: estas cosas atan mucho.

Tras esto, el paseo concluyó en silencio, porque Luke se había descargado de sus pensamientos hasta agotar todos sus recursos para la conversación, y el señor Tulliver había pasado de los recuerdos a una dolorosa reflexión sobre las distintas dificultades entre las que podía elegir. Aquella tarde, a la hora del té, Maggie advirtió que se encontraba inusualmente ausente; después permaneció sentado en el sillón, echado hacia delante, mirando el suelo mientras movía los labios y meneaba la cabeza de vez en cuando. Después miró intensamente a la señora Tulliver, que tejía delante de él; más tarde observó a Maggie, la cual, mientras se inclinaba sobre su labor, era plenamente consciente de que en la mente de su padre estaba desarrollándose una tragedia. De repente, el señor Tulliver cogió el atizador y rompió con rabia un gran trozo de carbón.

—Pero Tulliver, ¿en qué estás pensando? —exclamó la señora Tulliver, alzando los ojos alarmada—. Es un derroche romper el carbón: apenas nos queda carbón del grande y no sé de dónde podremos sacar más.

—Me parece que esta noche no se encuentra usted muy bien, padre —dijo Maggie—. Parece usted inquieto.

—Bueno, ¿cómo es que Tom no está aquí? —preguntó el señor Tulliver con impaciencia.

—¡Ay, señor! ¿Es ya la hora? Tengo que ir a prepararle la cena —dijo la señora Tulliver, dejando lo que estaba tejiendo y saliendo de la habitación.

—Son casi las ocho y media —dijo el señor Tulliver—. No tardará en llegar. Ve a buscar la Biblia grande y ábrela en la primera página, allí donde lo apuntamos todo. Y trae pluma y tintero.

Maggie obedeció intrigada: pero su padre no le dio más órdenes y se limitó a aguardar el rumor de los pasos de Tom en la gravilla, aparentemente irritado por el viento que se había levantado y cuyo rumor

ahogaba todos los otros sonidos. Sus ojos tenían una luz extraña que consiguió asustar a Maggie y ésta empezó a desear también la llegada de Tom.

—Aquí está —exclamó el señor Tulliver animado cuando por fin se oyó llamar a la puerta. Maggie fue a abrirla, pero su madre salió apresuradamente de la cocina.

—Espera, Maggie. Ya abro yo —dijo.

La señora Tulliver había empezado a asustarse un poco por la tardanza de su hijo y estaba celosa de todo lo que los demás pudieran hacer por él.

—Tienes la cena lista junto al fuego de la cocina, hijo mío —anunció mientras Tom se quitaba la chaqueta y el sombrero—. Puedes cenar solo, como a ti te gusta, sin que yo *t'*hable.

—Madre, me parece que padre quiere hablar con Tom —intervino Maggie—. Primero debe ir al salón.

Tom entró con la expresión triste que acostumbraba a tener por las noches, pero vio de inmediato la Biblia abierta y la escribanía, y lanzó a su padre una mirada de sorpresa e inquietud.

—Pasa, pasa, llegas tarde —dijo su padre—. Quiero que hagas una cosa.

—¿Pasa algo, padre? —preguntó Tom.

—Siéntate, sentaros todos —ordenó el señor Tulliver—. Y tú, Tom, siéntate aquí, quiero que escribas una cosa en la Biblia.

Los tres tomaron asiento sin dejar de mirar al señor Tulliver, el cual empezó a hablar lentamente, mirando primero a su esposa.

—He tomado una decisión, Bessy, y quiero cumplir la promesa que te hice. Nos espera la misma tumba a los dos y no debemos guardarnos rencor. Me quedaré aquí, trabajaré para Wakem y me comportaré con honradez: no hay Tulliver que no sea honrado, no lo olvides, Tom —añadió, alzando la voz—: Seguirán criticándome incluso mientras intento pagar las deudas, pero no es culpa mía, es que hay demasiados bribones en este mundo, son demasiados para mí y tengo que rendirme. Dejaré que me pongan el yugo, porque tienes razón al decir que *t'*he metido en todo este lío, Bessy, y trabajaré para él como si se tratara de un hombre honrado: yo soy un

hombre honrado, aunque nunca volveré a levantar cabeza: soy un árbol caído… Un árbol caído.

Hizo una pausa y miró hacia el suelo.

—¡Pero no se lo perdonaré! —añadió de repente en un tono más fuerte y profundo, levantando la cabeza—. Ya sé que dicen que él no me quería perjudicar, así es como el viejo Pero Botero ayuda a los bribones, ha estado en la raíz de todo. Aunque es un caballero educado, ya lo sé, ya lo sé. Dicen que yo no tenía que recurrir a la ley, pero ¿cómo se hace justicia? Para él la ley no significa nada, ya lo sé, es uno de los caballeros que consiguen dinero haciendo negocios con los pobres y, cuando los han convertido en mendigos, les dan limosna. ¡No pienso perdonarlo! Desearía que cayera sobre él tal deshonra, que su hijo quisiera olvidarlo. Quisiera que cometiera algún delito que se viera obligado a trabajar con sus propias manos. Pero eso no sucederá, es demasiado bribón para que la ley lo pille. Y no olvides eso, Tom: no lo perdones nunca, nunca, si quieres ser hijo mío. Quizá llegue el día en que consigas que se arrepienta: yo no veré ese momento. Yo tendré la cabeza agachada bajo el yugo. Ahora escribe eso, todo eso, en la Biblia.

—¿Qué cosa, padre? —preguntó Maggie, dejándose caer junto a sus rodillas, pálida y temblorosa—. Es malo maldecir y guardar rencor.

—No lo es, te lo aseguro —exclamó su padre con ferocidad—. Lo malo es que los bribones prosperen, eso es obra del demonio. Haz lo que te digo Tom: escribe.

—¿Qué debo escribir, padre? —preguntó Tom con sombría sumisión.

—Escribe que tu padre, Edward Tulliver, se puso a trabajar para John Wakem, el hombre que había contribuido a su ruina, porque había prometido a su esposa reparar en la medida de lo posible el daño hecho, y porque quiero morir en el lugar donde nací y donde nació mi padre. Ponlo con las palabras adecuadas, ya sabrás cómo, y después escribe que no perdono a Wakem por todo esto y que, aunque trabajaré para él como un hombre honrado, deseo que caiga sobre él todo tipo de males. Escríbelo.

Se produjo un silencio sepulcral mientras la pluma de Tom se desplazaba sobre el papel: la señora Tulliver parecía asustada y Maggie temblaba como una hoja.

—Ahora léeme lo que has escrito —ordenó el señor Tulliver.

Tom lo leyó lentamente.

—Ahora pon que recordarás lo que Wakem ha hecho a tu padre y que, llegado el momento, harás que él y los suyos se arrepientan. Y firma con tu nombre completo, Tomas Tulliver.

—¡No, padre, querido padre! —exclamó Maggie, estremecida de miedo —. No hagas que Tom escriba eso.

—¡Calla, Maggie! —exclamó Tom—: Quiero escribirlo.

Libro cuarto

El valle de la humillación

Capítulo I

Una variedad del protestantismo que Bossuet desconocía

Tal vez, lector, hayas tenido oportunidad de descender por el Ródano en un día de verano y sentir que la luz del sol se tornaba sombría por causa de los pueblos en ruinas que salpican las orillas en algunos tramos de su curso, contándonos que el rápido río creció en una ocasión, igual que un dios que arrastra «todo lo que tenía aliento de espíritu de vida en sus narice».[23] y convierte su morada en desolación. Quizás hayas pensado, lector, que estos tristes restos de casas vulgares, que en sus mejores tiempos eran meras muestras de una vida sórdida, propia en todos sus detalles de nuestra era vulgar, causan un efecto muy distinto al de las ruinas del castillado Rin, desmoronadas y fundidas con tal armonía en las laderas verdes y rocosas que parecen formar parte del paisaje natural, como el pino de montaña: es más, incluso recién construidos, los castillos poseerían esa cualidad natural, como si los hubiera edificado una raza nacida de la tierra que hubiera heredado de su poderosa madre un sublime instinto creador de formas. ¡Qué época novelesca! Si aquellos saqueadores feudales eran ogros malhumorados y borrachos, al menos la bestia salvaje que llevaban dentro poseía cierta grandeza: eran jabalíes que rasgaban y desgarraban con sus colmillos, pero no cerdos domésticos: representaban las fuerzas demoníacas siempre en conflicto con la belleza, la virtud y las costumbres civilizadas: ofrecían un hermoso contraste con el trovador errante, la princesa de labios suaves, el piadoso ermitaño y el tímido judío. Cuando la luz del sol caía

sobre el destellante acero y los estandartes al viento, aquélla eras una época llena de color: una época de aventuras y fieras luchas; y no sólo eso, sino también de arte y entusiasmo religiosos. ¿Acaso no fue entonces cuando se construyeron las catedrales y los grandes emperadores dejaron sus palacios occidentales para morir ante las fortalezas infieles en el sagrado Oriente? Por todos estos motivos los castillos del Rin me inspiran poesía: pertenecen a la gran vida histórica de la humanidad y evocan en mí toda una época. En cambio, los esqueletos angulosos de ojos hundidos y color mortuorio de los pueblos a orillas del Ródano me oprimen con la sensación de que la vida humana —gran parte, por lo menos— es una existencia angosta, fea y humillante que ni siquiera la calamidad eleva, sino que, al contrario, tiende a exhibirla en toda su vulgaridad; y tengo la cruel convicción de que las vidas de las que esas ruinas son resto formaban parte de una tosca suma de oscura vitalidad que caerá en el mismo olvido que las sucesivas generaciones de hormigas y castores.

Quizá, lector, hayas sentido una similar sensación opresiva mientras contemplabas la anticuada vida familiar que transcurre a orillas del Floss y que la pena difícilmente consigue elevar por encima de lo tragicómico. Dirás que es una vida sórdida ésta que llevan los Tulliver y los Dodson, los cuales no se guían por principios sublimes, por visiones románticas ni por una fe activa y sacrificada; no los empujan ninguna de esas pasiones incontrolables que crean las oscuras sombras de la miseria y el crimen; no tienen necesidades toscas y primitivas, no conocen las tareas duras, sumisas y mal pagadas, no descifran con capacidad infantil lo que ha escrito la naturaleza, todo lo cual da carácter poético a la vida del campesino. Poseen costumbres y conceptos mundanos convencionales sin educación y sin refinamiento. Sin duda, la forma de vida humana más prosaica: orgullosa respetabilidad sobre una basta calesa; mundanería sin guarnición. Si observamos de cerca a estas gentes, incluso cuando la mano de hierro de la desgracia les ha hecho perder el vínculo mecánico que las une al mundo, se advierte escasa huella de la religión y la impronta aún menor de un claro credo cristiano. Su fe en lo oculto, en lo que respecta a sus manifestaciones, se diría que posee un carácter pagano: sus nociones morales, si bien sostenidas con tenacidad, no parecen responder a otro criterio que a la

costumbre hereditaria. No se puede vivir entre gente así; uno se ahoga por falta de una salida hacia lo hermoso, grande o noble; se irrita con esos hombres y mujeres grises que no casan con la tierra en donde viven, esta rica llanura por la que fluye el gran río hacia delante y une el débil pulso de la vieja población inglesa con los latidos del poderoso corazón del mundo. Se diría más propia del misterio de la suerte humana la vigorosa superstición que azota a sus dioses o a sí misma que la formicante actitud de esos Dodson y Tulliver.

Comparto contigo, lector, esta sensación de estrechez opresiva; pero es necesario que la sintamos si queremos entender cómo actuaba sobre las vidas de Tom y de Maggie, cómo ha afectado a los jóvenes de varias generaciones que, empujados por la tendencia al progreso de las cosas humanas, se han elevado por encima del nivel mental de la generación precedente, a la que, sin embargo, los ataban las fibras más fuertes de su corazón. De este modo, en cada población, cientos de corazones oscuros representan el sufrimiento, como víctimas o mártires, propio de todo avance histórico de la humanidad: y no debemos temer esta comparación de las cosas pequeñas con las grandes: ¿acaso la ciencia no nos dice que centra su empeño en la búsqueda de aquello que vincule lo más pequeño a lo más grande? Por lo que sé, en las ciencias naturales nada carece de importancia para el estudioso que posea una amplia visión de estos vínculos ni para quien cada objeto sugiera una amplia gama de condiciones. Y lo mismo sucede con la observación de la naturaleza humana.

Sin duda, las ideas religiosas y morales de los Dodson y los Tulliver eran demasiado específicas para que pudiera llegarse a ellas de modo deductivo partiendo de la afirmación de que formaban parte de la población protestante de Gran Bretaña. Su teoría de la vida poseía una base sólida, como todas las teorías a partir de las cuales se han criado y florecido todas las familias decentes y prósperas; pero carecía de toda teología. Si cuando las hermanas Dodson eran solteras sus Biblias se abrían con más facilidad en una página que en otra se debía a que guardaban en ellas pétalos secos de tulipanes, distribuidos con cierta imparcialidad, sin preferencia alguna por lo histórico, piadoso o doctrinal. Su religión era sencilla, casi pagana, pero no había en ella herejía alguna —si es que herejía significa elección—

porque no sabían que existiera ninguna otra religión, con la única excepción de las corrientes no anglicanas, rasgo que parecía trasmitirse de padres a hijos, como el asma. ¿Cómo podrían saberlo? El vicario de su agradable parroquia rural no era polemizador y, en cambio, se le daba bien jugar al *whist* y tenía siempre a punto alguna broma para las parroquianas de buen ver. La religión de los Dodson consistía en reverenciar todo aquello que fuera tradicional y respetable: era necesario estar bautizado para que te enterraran en el cementerio y tomar los últimos sacramentos como garantía contra una serie de vagos peligros; pero era igualmente necesario contar para el funeral con adecuados portadores del féretro y con unos jamones bien curados, así como dejar un testamento irreprochable. Ningún Dodson desearía que se le echara en cara el olvido de nada apropiado o que formara parte desde tiempo inmemorial de las tradiciones familiares y de las costumbres claramente indicadas en la práctica de los parroquianos más acaudalados: cosas tales como la obediencia a los padres, la fidelidad a los consanguíneos, la laboriosidad, la honradez, el espíritu de ahorro, la limpieza cuidadosa de todo tipo de utensilios de madera y cobre, la acumulación de monedas que podrían desaparecer de la circulación, la producción de bienes de primera clase para el mercado y la preferencia general por todo aquello que fuera casero. Los Dodson eran orgullosos y su orgullo residía en frustrar por completo todo deseo ajeno de reprocharles algún incumplimiento de un deber o norma tradicional. En muchos sentidos se trataba de un orgullo razonable, puesto que identificaba el honor con la integridad perfecta, el cuidado en el trabajo y la fidelidad a las normas establecidas; y la sociedad debe la presencia de cualidades importantes en algunos de sus miembros a las madres de la clase de los Dodson, que preparaban bien la mantequilla y los platos tradicionales y se habrían sentido avergonzadas por hacerlo de otro modo. Ser honrado y pobre nunca fue la divisa de un Dodson, pero todavía menos lo era ser pobre y parecer acaudalado; el lema de la familia era ser rico y honrado, y no sólo rico, sino más incluso de lo imaginado. Llevar una existencia respetable y contar con los portadores adecuados en el funeral suponía alcanzar los objetivos últimos de esta vida, pero ese éxito quedaría totalmente anulado si, al leer el testamento, el prestigio del difunto cayera por los suelos por ser más pobre

de lo esperado o por legar sus bienes de modo caprichoso, sin guardar la adecuada proporción con los grados de parentesco. El comportamiento con los familiares debía ser siempre el adecuado: y lo propio era corregirlos severamente si su actitud no honraba a la familia, pero sin privarlos de su parte correspondiente de hebillas de los zapatos y otras propiedades. Cualidad destacada del carácter de los Dodson era su sinceridad; tanto sus vicios como sus virtudes formaban parte de un egoísmo orgulloso y franco que aborrecía enérgicamente cualquier gesto contra su fama y su interés; reprenderían duramente a cualquier familiar descarriado, pero nunca lo abandonarían o harían caso omiso de su presencia: no permitirían que le faltara el pan, aunque exigirían que lo comiera con hierbas amargas.

La misma fe tradicional corría por las venas de los Tulliver, pero arrastrada por una sangre más rica, con trazas de una imprudencia generosa un afecto cálido y una temeridad impetuosa. Algunos habían oído contar al abuelo del señor Tulliver que descendía de un tal Ralph Tulliver, un individuo brillante que terminó en la ruina. Es muy probable que el listo de Ralph viviera por todo lo alto, montara briosos corceles y fuera obstinado en sus opiniones. En cambio, nunca se había oído hablar de un Dodson que se arruinara: no era ése el estilo de la familia.

Si éstas eran las filosofías de la vida según las cuales se habían educado los Dodson y los Tulliver en los meritorios tiempos de Pitt y de los precios altos, el lector podrá deducir de lo que ya conoce de la sociedad de Saint Ogg's que en sus años de madurez ninguna influencia los había cambiado. Incluso era posible que, tras tantos años de sermones anticatólicos, las gentes conservaran múltiples ideas paganas y, sin embargo, se tuvieran por buenos fieles anglicanos: de modo que no puede sorprendernos que el señor Tulliver, aunque asistía a la iglesia con frecuencia, dejara constancia de su afán de venganza en las guardas de la Biblia familiar. Nada podía reprocharse al vicario de la encantadora parroquia rural a la que pertenecía el molino de Dorlcote: era hombre de una familia excelente, un soltero irreprochable de aficiones elegantes que se había licenciado con notas brillantes y pertenecía a una hermandad universitaria. El señor Tulliver sentía por él el debido respeto, como hacia con todo lo relacionado con la Iglesia; pero consideraba que la Iglesia era una cosa y el sentido común

otra, y que no quería que nadie le contara, precisamente a él, lo que era el sentido común. La naturaleza ha dotado con pequeños zarcillos a algunas semillas que necesitan encontrar un cobijo para protegerse en circunstancias desfavorables, con la finalidad de que puedan aferrarse a superficies poco receptivas. Al parecer, la semilla espiritual sembrada en el señor Tulliver carecía de recursos y se la había llevado el viento.

Capítulo II

Las espinas atraviesan el nido desgarrado

La agitación que acompaña a los primeros golpes de la adversidad trae consigo una fuerza que nos sostiene, de la misma manera que con frecuencia el dolor agudo es también estímulo y produce una excitación que se transforma en fuerza efímera. En cambio, la desesperación amenaza en la vida lenta y alterada que los sigue, cuando la pena ya no es novedad y no posee la intensidad emotiva que contrarresta el dolor, cuando los días transcurren en una monotonía sin esperanza y el sufrimiento es una aburrida rutina; entonces se siente el hambre perentoria del alma y los sentidos se alertan para aprender algún secreto de nuestra existencia que permita obtener satisfacción de la resistencia.

Este momento de extrema necesidad había llegado a Maggie, que sólo contaba trece años. A su precocidad, la niña añadía esta temprana experiencia de lucha, de combate entre el impulso interior y el hecho exterior, propio de todo carácter imaginativo y apasionado; y los años transcurridos desde que clavaba clavos en el fetiche de madera, entre las vigas carcomidas de la buhardilla, se habían llenado con una vida tan ansiosa del triple mundo de la realidad, los libros y las fantasías que Maggie resultaba extrañamente adulta para su edad, con la única excepción de su total falta de prudencia y dominio de sí misma, cualidades que, por el contrario, hacían adulto a Tom en plena infancia intelectual. Y en aquellos momentos, la vida que le había tocado en suerte empezaba a adquirir una monotonía triste y tranquila que la hacía encerrarse más en sí misma. Su

padre podía ocuparse otra vez de su trabajo, sus asuntos se habían solucionado y trabajaba como empleado de Wakem en el lugar de siempre. Tom iba y venía por las mañanas y por las tardes, y en casa estaba cada vez más callado: ¿qué había que decir? Todos los días eran iguales y el interés de Tom por la vida, aplastado y repelido en todos los otros sentidos, se concentraba en la única vía posible: la ambiciosa resistencia a la adversidad. Las rarezas de su padre y de su madre le resultaban muy irritantes, ahora que estaban despojadas de todos los acompañamientos propios de una casa próspera, ya que Tom tenía una mirada muy clara y prosaica que no enturbiaban las neblinas de los sentimientos o de la imaginación. La pobre señora Tulliver parecía incapaz de volver a ser la misma y de recuperar su plácida actividad doméstica: ¿cómo iba a hacerlo? Habían desaparecido los objetos entre los que su mente se desplazaba satisfecha: le habían arrebatado repentinamente todas las pequeñas esperanzas, planes y especulaciones, todos los pequeños cuidados que dedicaba a unos tesoros que durante un cuarto de siglo, desde que compró las primeras tenacillas para los terrones de azúcar, habían hecho de su mundo un lugar comprensible, y aquella vida vacía la desconcertaba. No dejaba de dar vueltas a la insoluble pregunta de por qué había tenido que sucederle a ella lo que no sucedía a otras mujeres, y así expresaba la perpetua comparación entre el pasado y el presente. Daba pena contemplar cómo aquella rubia atractiva y robusta iba ajándose y adelgazando, víctima de una inquietud física y mental que con frecuencia la hacía vagar por la casa vacía tras terminar su trabajo, hasta que Maggie, alarmada, iba a buscarla y la hacía parar explicándole lo mucho que inquietaba a Tom que arruinara su salud por no sentarse a descansar. Y, sin embargo, en medio de aquella indefensa imbecilidad, un humilde rasgo de devoto espíritu materno resultaba conmovedor e inspiraba la ternura de Maggie hacia su pobre madre, en medio de las pequeñas pero agotadoras penas que su debilidad mental causaba. No permitía que Maggie hiciera el trabajo más pesado y que más estropeaba las manos, y se enfurruñaba cuando Maggie intentaba aliviarla de tanto frotar y restregar.

—Déjalo, hija mía, se *t'*encallecerán las manos —decía—. Corresponde a tu madre hacerlo: yo ya no puedo coser, me falla la vista.

Y seguía cepillando y cuidando con mimo el cabello de Maggie, con el que se había reconciliado, a pesar de su negativa a rizárselo, ahora que era tan largo y espeso. Maggie no era su niña mimada y, en general, habría preferido que fuera muy distinta; sin embargo, aquel corazón femenino, tan herido en sus pequeños deseos personales, hallaba consuelo en el futuro de su joven hija, y la madre encontraba satisfacción estropeándose las manos para salvar otras con tanta vida por delante.

Pero la presencia constante de los perplejos lamentos de su madre resultaba menos dolorosa para Maggie que la depresión hosca y taciturna de su padre. Mientras estuvo paralizado y pareció que seguiría siempre en aquella condición infantil de dependencia —es decir, mientras apenas fue consciente de sus problemas—, el amor y la compasión eran para Maggie casi una inspiración, un nuevo poder que haría fácil lo más difícil, por cariño a él; sin embargo, tras la dependencia infantil pasó a un estado de concentración que contrastaba con su antiguo talante comunicativo y animado, y se prolongaba día tras día y semana tras semana, sin que sus ojos tristes mostraran nunca entusiasmo ni alegría. Para los jóvenes resulta cruelmente incomprensible esta sombría monotonía en las personas ancianas o de mediana edad arrastradas por la vida a la decepción y el descontento, en cuyos rostros una sonrisa resulta tan extraña que las tristes líneas en torno a los labios y el ceño parecen ignorar lo que es y ésta desaparece porque nada la acoge. «¿Por qué no se animan y se alegran de vez en cuando?», piensa la vitalidad juvenil. «Si se lo propusieran, les resultaría muy fáci». Y esas nubes plomizas que nunca se abren consiguen impacientar incluso al afecto filial que mana sólo de la ternura y la piedad en momentos de la más obvia aflicción.

El señor Tulliver no se demoraba fuera de su casa: se escabullía a toda prisa del mercado y rechazaba todas las invitaciones para quedarse a charlar, como en los viejos tiempos, en las casas donde acudía por asuntos de trabajo. No era capaz de resignarse: en todas las actitudes su orgullo se sentía herido, y en todo comportamiento, amable o frío, detectaba una alusión a su cambio de circunstancias. Ni siquiera los días en que Wakem aparecía para recorrer las tierras a caballo e interesarse por el negocio eran tan malos como los de mercado, en los que tenía que encontrarse con varios

de los acreedores que habían llegado a un acuerdo con él. En aquellos momentos, concentraba todo su pensamiento y esfuerzo en pagar las deudas; y bajo la influencia de esta absorbente exigencia de su carácter, el otrora hombre generoso que odiaba que se le escatimara nada o escatimar a los demás en su propia casa, fue metamorfoseándose en un tacaño y un mezquino. La señora Tulliver no conseguía economizar a su gusto en la comida y el fuego, y él se negaba a comer nada que no fuera de la peor calidad. Tom, aunque abatido y hastiado por la hosquedad de su padre y la tristeza de la casa, coincidía plenamente en que había que pagar a los acreedores, y el pobre chico aportó su primera paga trimestral con una deliciosa sensación de éxito y se la entregó a su padre para que la metiera en la caja de hojalata que contenía los ahorros. La pequeña reserva de soberanos de la lata parecía ser lo único que aportaba un débil rayo de placer a los ojos del molinero; tenue y efímero, porque pronto se disipaba al pensar en el tiempo necesario —tal vez superior a los años que le quedaban — para que los menguados ahorros pudieran terminar con la pesadilla de la deuda. El déficit de más de quinientas libras, al que habría que sumar los intereses acumulados, parecía un abismo demasiado difícil de llenar economizando treinta chelines al mes, aunque a esto se sumaran los probables ahorros de Tom. En este punto coincidían por completo los cuatro seres tan distintos que, poco antes de irse a la cama, se sentaban ante el agonizante fuego de astillas que producía un calor barato. La señora Tulliver llevaba en las venas la orgullosa integridad de los Dodson y de acuerdo con la educación recibida pensaba que quitar a los demás su dinero de modo fraudulento —otro modo de definir una deuda— equivalía a una especie de picota moral: habría sido perverso, en su opinión, ir en contra de los deseos de su esposo de «hacer lo correct» y reparar su nombre. Albergaba la confusa noción de que si se pagaba a todos los acreedores se le devolvería la plata y la ropa y, al mismo tiempo, tenía la idea innata de que mientras uno debía dinero y no lo devolvía no podía considerarse dueño de nada. Refunfuñaba un poco porque el señor Tulliver se negaba a exigir la devolución de la deuda de los Moss: pero aceptaba sumisamente todas las exigencias de economía doméstica, hasta el punto de privarse de los caprichos más baratos: su único gesto de rebelión consistía en introducir

clandestinamente en la cocina algo que pudiera mejorar un poco la cena de Tom.

Estas ideas estrictas sobre las deudas que defendían los anticuados Tulliver tal vez hagan sonreír a muchos lectores de estos tiempos de filosofía más relajada y criterios comerciales menos estrictos, según los cuales todo se equilibra sin que tengamos que intervenir: el hecho de que mi proveedor pierda dinero por mi culpa se contempla desde la serena certeza de que habrá otro proveedor que saque más beneficios de la cuenta y, puesto que en este mundo bien tiene que haber deudas, es mero egoísmo no querer ser nosotros los deudores. Cuento aquí la historia de personas muy sencillas que nunca habían tenido dudas esclarecedoras en relación con su integridad y su honor.

Bajo esta lúgubre melancolía y limitación de afanes, el señor Tulliver conservaba un cariño especial hacía la «mocit», que convertía su presencia en una necesidad, aunque ésta no bastara para alegrarlo. Seguía siendo la niña de sus ojos, pero la dulce fuente del amor paternal se mezclaba ahora con la amargura, igual que todo lo demás. Cuando, por la noche, Maggie dejaba su trabajo, acostumbraba a sentarse en un taburete junto a las rodillas de su padre y apoyaba en ellas la mejilla. ¡Cuánto deseaba que le acariciara la cabeza o diera alguna muestra de que lo tranquilizaba la sensación de tener una hija que lo quería! Pero ahora sus pequeños mimos no obtenían respuesta de su padre ni de Tom, sus dos ídolos. Durante los breves intervalos que pasaba en casa, Tom se mostraba cansado y abstraído, y su padre estaba amargamente preocupado con la idea de que la niña crecía y se transformaba rápidamente en una mujer. En aquellas circunstancias, tenía pocas posibilidades de contraer un buen matrimonio y le repugnaba la idea de que se casara con un hombre pobre, como su tía Gritty: eso sí que haría que se revolviera en su tumba: ver a su mocita aplastada por los hijos y el trabajo como su tía Moss. Cuando las mentes incultas, con una estrecha gama de experiencias personales, se encuentran bajo la presión de la desgracia continuada, su vida interior tiende a convertirse en una rueda perpetua de pensamientos tristes y amargos: las mismas palabras y las mismas escenas se repiten una y otra vez, acompañadas del mismo estado de ánimo; el fin de año los encuentra tal como estaban al principio, como si

fueran máquinas preparadas para repetir una serie de movimientos recurrentes.

Pocos visitantes rompían la monotonía de los días. Las visitas de los tíos eran breves: sin duda, no podían quedarse a comer y la coacción que ejercía el tenso silencio del señor Tulliver, que parecía sumarse al eco de la sala vacía y sin alfombra cuando hablaban las tías, hacía que esas visitas familiares resultaran desagradables para ambos lados y tendían a escasear. En cuanto a otras amistades, las personas que sufren un revés social parecen quedar envueltas en un aire gélido, y la gente prefiere mantenerse tan lejos como de una habitación helada: unos seres humanos, sólo un hombre y una mujer, sin muebles, sin nada que ofrecer y que han dejado de figurar en sociedad, presentan una embarazosa ausencia de motivos para desear visitarlos o de temas de conversación posibles. En aquellos tiempos lejanos, en la civilizada sociedad cristiana de estos reinos, las familias que habían descendido de nivel social se veían envueltas en un terrible aislamiento, a menos que pertenecieran a alguna pequeña corriente religiosa, en la que se consigue cierta calidez fraternal ardiendo en el fuego sagrado.

Capítulo III

Una voz del pasado

Una tarde, cuando los castaños empezaban a florecer, Maggie sacó una silla a la puerta de la casa y se sentó con un libro sobre las rodillas. Sus ojos negros se apartaban del libro, pero no parecían disfrutar de los rayos de sol que atravesaban la pantalla de jazmín del porche situado a su derecha y proyectaban sombras en forma de hoja sobre su pálida y redonda mejilla; por el contrario, se diría que buscaban algo que el sol no mostraba. Aquel día había sido más aciago que de costumbre: su padre, tras una visita a Wakem, había sufrido un ataque de ira durante el cual había pegado por una falta fútil al chico que servía en el molino. Ya en otra ocasión, tras su enfermedad, había sufrido un ataque similar y había azotado a su caballo, y la escena había dejado en Maggie una huella duradera. Se le había ocurrido pensar que tal vez pudiera pegar a su madre si a ésta se le ocurriera intervenir con voz blanda en un momento poco oportuno. El peor de sus temores era que su padre pudiera añadir a su desgracia presente algún acto desdichado e irreparable. El ajado libro de texto de Tom que tenía sobre las rodillas no le proporcionaba ningún consuelo ante aquel temor y sus ojos se le llenaban de lágrimas una y otra vez mientras vagaban de un lado a otro sin ver los castaños ni el lejano horizonte, sino sólo escenas futuras de tristeza doméstica.

De repente le sorprendió el sonido de la puerta de la verja y el rumor de pasos en la gravilla. No era Tom, sino un hombre con una gorra de piel de

foca y un chaleco de felpa azul; llevaba un saco a la espalda y lo seguía un bull terrier moteado de fiero aspecto.

—¡Ah, Bob! ¡Eres tú! —exclamó Maggie con una sonrisa de placer al reconocerlo, porque no habían sido muchos los gestos amables capaces de borrar el recuerdo de la generosidad de Bob—. ¡Cuánto me alegro de verte!

—Gracias, señorita —saludó Bob, levantando la gorra con expresión radiante, pero inmediatamente se sintió violento y se relajó mirando al perro y diciéndole en tono de enfado—. Lárgate, idiota.

—Mi hermano todavía no ha llegado a casa, Bob —dijo Maggie—. Pasa el día en Saint Ogg's.

—Bueno, señorita —dijo Bob—. Me gustaría ver al señor Tom, pero no he venido por eso. Mire lo que traigo.

Bob depositaba en aquel momento el fardo en el umbral y, junto con él, un paquete de libros pequeños atados con un cordel. Sin embargo, al parecer no era ése el objeto sobre el que pretendía llamar la atención de Maggie, sino algo que llevaba bajo el brazo, envuelto en un pañuelo rojo.

—¡Mire! —dijo, colocando el paquete rojo sobre los otros y desenvolviéndolo—. A lo mejor se piensa que me tomo libertades, señorita, pero he encontrado estos libros por *casualidá* y me se ocurrió pensar que a lo mejor compensan un poco los que perdió: oí que decía algo de las *'lustraciones* ¡mire ésta!

Al abrir el pañuelo rojo mostró un número atrasado del anuario *Keepsake* y seis o siete ejemplares de *Portrait Gallery* en octavo; la enfática petición se refería a un retrato de Jorge IV con toda la majestad de su cráneo hundido y un voluminoso pañuelo anudado al cuello.

—Aquí hay toda clase de caballeros —siguió Bob, pasando las páginas con entusiasmo—, con todo tipo de narices, algunos son calvos y otros llevan peluca. Caballeros del *parliamento*, digo yo que serán. Y aquí hay muchas damas —añadió, abriendo el ejemplar de *Keepsake*—, algunas con el cabello rizado y otras con el cabello liso: unas sonríen con la cabeza torcida y otras parecen a punto de echarse a llorar, mire ésas, sentadas en el campo y vestidas como las damas que bajan de los carruajes cuando van a los bailes del Old Hall. Caramba, ¡qué se pondrán los hombres cuando vayan a cortejarlas! Anoche me quedé hasta las doce mirándolas. Como que

me miraban como si me conocieran. Pero bueno, yo no sabría qué decirles. Serán mejor compañía para *usté*, señorita, y el hombre del puesto de libros me dijo que eran las mejores *`lustraciones*, que eran de primera.

—¿Y las has comprado para mí, Bob? —preguntó Maggie, profundamente conmovida por su amabilidad—. ¡Qué bueno eres! Pero temo que te hayan costado muy caras.

—¡Ca! —dijo Bob—. Habría pagado tres veces más si con eso se consolara *usté* por lo que ha perdido, señorita. Porque no me se olvida la cara que tenía cuando perdió los otros libros: me *s'*ha quedado pintada como si la tuviera delante de los ojos. Y cuando vi los libros abiertos en el puesto, con una dama que me miraba con unos ojos como los de esté cuando estaba triste, perdone esta libertad, señorita, pensé que me tomaría la libertad de comprárselos, y entonces compré estos libros llenos de caballeros para completar el lote, y después —llegado a este punto, Bob alzó el pequeño paquete de libros— pensé que también le gustaría tener un poco de letra, no sólo dibujos, y compré estos por si le parecen bien, están llenos de letras, y pensé que no estaría mal que acompañaran a los otros que son un poco mejores. Y espero que no me los rechace y me diga que no los quiere, como hizo el señor Tom con los soberanos.

—No, claro que no, Bob —contestó Maggie—. Te agradezco mucho que hayas pensado en mí, creo que nadie ha sido nunca tan amable conmigo. No tengo muchos amigos que se ocupen de mí.

—Pues tenga un perro, señorita: son mejores amigos que cualquier cristiano —dijo Bob, depositando de nuevo el saco que había tomado con intención de marcharse; se sentía muy tímido ante una muchacha como Maggie aunque, como acostumbraba a decir, «se le escapaba la lengu» en cuanto empezaba a hablar—. No puedo regalarle a Mumps, porque se moriría de pena si se separara de mí. ¿Verdad, perillán? —Mumps optó por expresarse con un único movimiento afirmativo del rabo—, pero le regalaré un cachorro si quiere.

—No, gracias, Bob. Tenemos ya un perro guardián y no puedo tener otro mío.

—Bueno, pues es una pena. Conozco un cachorro *manífico*, si no le importa que no sea de raza: su madre actúa en un número de feria, es una

perra *ecepcional*: algunos, desde que se levantan hasta que se acuestan, muestran menos cabeza que ella con sus ladridos. Uno que vende ollas por ahí, un oficio tan humilde como el de todos los vendedores ambulantes, fue y dijo un día: «Esa Toby no es más que una perra mestiza que no vale *pa n*»., pero yo le dije: «¿Y tú qué? Tampoco pareces de raza. Si se te mira bien, no parece que tuvieras gran cosa que heredar de tu padre y de tu madr». No es que yo sea muy *refinao*, pero no me gusta que un chucho se meta con otro. Buenas tardes, señorita —añadió Bob bruscamente, alzando de nuevo el fardo, consciente de que su lengua estaba comportándose con poca disciplina.

—Ven alguna tarde a ver a mi hermano, Bob —dijo Maggie.

—Sí, señorita. Gracias. Otro día. Presente mis respetos a su hermano. Ah, él si que ha crecido: a él le han crecido las piernas más que a mí.

El hatillo volvía a estar en el suelo, pues el gancho del bastón que lo sostenía estaba mal colocado.

—*Mumps* no es un chucho callejero, ¿verdad? —preguntó Maggie, adivinando que el amo agradecería cualquier interés por el perro.

—No, qué va, señorita —dijo Bob con una sonrisa de desdén—. *Mumps* es un cruce tan bueno como el mejor que se pueda encontrar a lo largo de todo el Floss, y lo he recorrido mucho con la barcaza. Caramba, si hasta los señores se detienen a mirarlo, pero *Mumps* no los mira: él va a lo suyo.

La expresión de *Mumps*, que parecía tolerar la existencia superflua de los objetos en general, confirmaba con creces estas alabanzas.

—Parece muy arisco, ¿dejará que lo acaricie?

—Sí, claro, se lo agradecerá. *Mumps* sabe distinguir a la gente. No es fácil engañarlo: sabe distinguir perfectamente a los ladrones. Vaya, hablo con él todo el rato cuando ando por sitios solitarios, y si he hecho alguna trampilla, *tamién* se lo cuento: no tengo secretos para él. Sabe todo lo del dedo gordo.

—¿Y qué le pasa al dedo gordo? —preguntó Maggie.

—Pues eso —dijo Bob, mostrando un ejemplar singularmente ancho de aquello que distingue al hombre del mono—: que cuando mido un trozo de franela, porque llevo franela porque pesa poco y es cara, pues un pulgar

ancho cuenta mucho. Señalo la yarda con el pulgar y corto por el lado de dentro, y las viejas no se dan ni cuenta.

—Pero Bob —le reconvino Maggie con aspecto serio—: eso es un engaño, no me gusta oírte contar estas cosas.

—¿No, señorita? —preguntó Bob compungido—. Entonces siento habérselo contado. Pero estoy *acostumbrao* a hablar con *Mumps*, y a él no le importa que engañe un poquillo a esas viejas tacañas que no paran de regatear, que querrían que les diera gratis la franela y les da igual que yo no gane ni *pa* comer. Señorita, no engaño a nadie que no quiera engañarme a mí, soy una persona honrada, señorita. Pero tengo que divertirme un poco, y ya no voy con los hurones. Ahora no veo más alimañas que a esas mujeres que regatean. Buenas tardes, señorita.

—Adiós, Bob. Gracias por traerme esos libros. Y vuelve a ver a Tom.

—Sí, señorita —dijo Bob, alejándose unos pasos; después dio media vuelta y añadió—: dejaré de hacer el truco del pulgar si no le parece bien, señorita, pero será una pena. No podré encontrar otro tan bueno. ¿Y de qué me servirá tener el pulgar ancho? *Pa* eso, lo mismo daba tenerlo delgado.

Maggie, convertida así en la Madonna y guía de Bob, se echó a reír a pesar suyo, ante lo cual los ojos azules de su adorador centellearon; bajo esos auspicios favorables, Bob saludó llevándose la mano a la gorra y se alejó.

A pesar del gran canto fúnebre de Burke, los días de los caballeros todavía no han desaparecido: sobreviven en la adoración que muchos jóvenes y hombres sienten por mujeres a las que siquiera piensan tocar el meñique o el orillo del vestido. Bob, cargado con su fardo, sentía una veneración tan respetuosa por aquella doncella de ojos negros como si fuera un caballero con armadura que pronunciara su nombre mientras espoleaba al caballo para entrar en batalla.

La expresión alegre no tardó desaparecer del rostro de Maggie, y tal vez sólo consiguió que, por contraste, la tristeza le pareciera mayor. Estaba demasiado abatida para dar respuesta alguna a la curiosidad que sentía sobre los libros que le había regalado Bob, de modo que se los llevó a su cuarto, los dejó allí y se sentó en el único taburete, sin ocuparse de mirarlos

todavía. Apoyó la mejilla contra el marco de la ventana, pensando que el desenfadado Bob era mucho más feliz que ella.

La sensación de soledad y total privación de alegría había ido haciéndose más profunda a medida que avanzaba la luminosa primavera. Todos los rincones favoritos del entorno, que se diría que la habían criado y alimentado junto con sus padres, participaban ahora de la tristeza familiar y no recibían la sonrisa solar. Todo afecto, todo placer que la pobre niña hubiera conocido era ahora como un nervio doloroso. Ya no tenía música, ni piano, ni voces armoniosas, ni deliciosos instrumentos de cuerda, cuyos apasionados cantos de espíritus presos transmitían una extraña vibración que le recorría todo el cuerpo. Y de su vida escolar no le quedaba nada más que una pequeña colección de libros de texto que hojeaba con la desagradable sensación de que ya los conocía y no le ofrecían ningún consuelo. Incluso en el colegio deseaba con frecuencia libros que contuvieran algo más: todo lo que aprendía en ellos le parecía como el extremo de una larga hebra que se rompía de inmediato. Y ahora, sin el atractivo indirecto de la emulación escolar, *Telémaco* resultaba árido, así como las dificiles cuestiones de la doctrina cristiana: carecían de sabor, de fuerza. Algunas veces, Maggie pensaba que se conformaría con algunas fantasías absorbentes: ¡Si tuviera todas las novelas de Scott y todos los poemas de Byron! Entonces quizá encontrara felicidad suficiente para aliviar el sufrimiento que le proporcionaba la vida diaria. Y, sin embargo… tampoco era eso lo que deseaba. Podía inventar mundos soñados, aunque ahora ninguno le resultaba satisfactorio. Quería alguna explicación sobre la dura vida real: sobre su taciturno padre, sentado a la triste mesa del desayuno; su madre infantil y desconcertada; las pequeñas tareas sórdidas que llenaban las horas, o el opresivo vacío de un ocio tedioso y sombrío; la necesidad de un amor tierno y efusivo; la cruel sensación de que a Tom no le importaba lo que ella pudiera pensar o sentir y de que ya no eran compañeros de juegos; la privación de todas las cosas agradables que se le ocurrían: deseaba poseer la clave que le permitiera comprender y así soportar la pesada carga que había caído sobre su joven corazón. Pensaba que si le hubieran enseñado «las cosas serias e importantes que sabían los grandes hombre», tal vez conocería los secretos de la vida; ¡ojalá tuviera

libros en los que pudiera aprender lo que sabían los sabios! A Maggie los santos y los mártires nunca le habían interesado tanto como los sabios y los poetas. Sabía poco de santos y mártires y había deducido, como resultado general de las enseñanzas recibidas, que eran un instrumento contra la expansión del catolicismo y que todos habían muerto en Smithfield[24].

En una de estas meditaciones se le ocurrió pensar que había olvidado los libros de texto de Tom, enviados a casa en su baúl, pero se encontró con que, de modo inexplicable, éstos habían quedado reducidos a los pocos y sobados ejemplares conocidos: el diccionario y la gramática latina, un *Delectus*, un ajado Eutropio, un manoseado Virgilio, una Lógica de Aldrich y el exasperante Euclides. Sin duda, el latín, Euclides y la lógica serían escalones fundamentales en la sabiduría masculina, en el conocimiento que hacía que a los hombres la vida les pareciera satisfactoria e incluso alegre. El afán de saber se mezclaba con fantasías en las que, por algún milagro, en el desierto de su futuro se imaginaba honrada por sus sorprendentes logros. Y la pobre niña, empujada por el hambre intelectual y la ilusión de recibir halagos algún día, empezó a mordisquear la dura corteza del fruto del árbol de la sabiduría y a llenar las horas de ocio con el latín, la geometría y las formas del silogismo; y, cuando conseguía comprender aquellos estudios masculinos, experimentaba una sensación de triunfo. Durante un par de semanas fue avanzando con decisión, aunque con alguna decepción ocasional, como si se hubiera encaminado sola hacia la Tierra Prometida y se encontrara perdida en un incierto viaje sin caminos y sin agua. Empujada por la severidad de su decisión, se llevaba a Aldrich a los campos y apartaba la vista del libro para fijarla en el cielo, donde brillaba la alondra, o hacia los juncos y arbustos de la orilla del río, donde un ave acuática susurraba en un vuelo inquieto y torpe, con la brusca sensación de que la relación entre Aldrich y el mundo vivo le resultaba tremendamente remota. A medida que pasaban los días iba desanimándose y el corazón inquieto se imponía sobre la mente paciente. Sin saber cómo, cuando se sentaba junto a la ventana con el libro, los ojos se empeñaban en mirar al vacío hacia el soleado exterior: después se le llenaban de lágrimas y algunas veces, si su madre no estaba presente, los estudios terminaban en sollozos. Se rebelaba contra su suerte, desfallecía ante esa soledad, e incluso los arrebatos de rabia y odio contra

un padre y una madre tan distintos de lo que habría deseado —contra Tom, que recibía y frenaba sus sentimientos y pensamientos y con una actitud distante— brotaban y fluían por encima de sus afectos y su conciencia como un río de lava, asustándola con la idea de que no le costaría mucho convertirse en un demonio. Después se perdía en fantasías descabelladas en las que huía del hogar en busca de algo menos triste y sórdido: iría a ver a algún gran hombre, Walter Scott, tal vez, y le contaría lo desgraciada y lo lista que era, y seguro que la ayudaba. Pero cuando se encontraba perdida en sus ensoñaciones, su padre bien podía entrar en la sala para pasar la tarde y, al ver que permanecía inmóvil sin advertir su presencia, espetarle:

—¡Vamos! ¿Es que tengo que irme a buscar yo las zapatillas?

La voz punzaba a Maggie como una espada: ella no era la única en estar triste y había estado pensando en dar la espalda a su familia y abandonarla.

Aquella tarde, la visión del alegre rostro pecoso de Bob había dado una nueva dirección a su descontento. Llegó a la conclusión de que parte de las penalidades de su vida se debían a que debía cargar con mayores ambiciones que los demás, que tenía que soportar un ansia imposible de algo, fuera esto lo que fuere, un deseo de lo mayor y mejor que ofrecía la tierra. Le habría gustado ser como Bob, con su ignorancia fácilmente satisfecha, o como Tom, que podía concentrarse en sus quehaceres con una firmeza que le permitía olvidar todo lo demás. ¡Pobre criatura! Mientras apoyaba la cabeza contra el marco de la ventana, retorciéndose las manos cada vez con más fuerza y golpeando el suelo con los pies, estaba tan sola como si fuera la única niña del mundo civilizado y hubiera abandonado la vida escolar inmadura para combates inevitables, sin mayor porción de la herencia que le correspondía de los tesoros del pensamiento —que las sucesivas generaciones de penosos esfuerzos han conseguido para la humanidad— que algunos fragmentos y retales de literatura menor e historia falsa, junto con abundante información banal sobre los sajones y otros reyes de dudoso ejemplo. Y, sin embargo, era infelizmente ignorante de las irrevocables leyes internas y externas a sí misma que, puesto que gobiernan las costumbres, se convierten en moralidad y que, tras desarrollar los sentimientos de sumisión y dependencia, se transforman en religión. Estaba tan sola en su sufrimiento como si todas las demás niñas recibieran

mimos y cuidados de adultos que tuvieran bien presentes los tiempos en que fueron jóvenes, cuando las necesidades eran imperiosas y poderosos los impulsos.

Finalmente, los ojos de Maggie cayeron sobre los libros y revistas depositados en el alféizar de la ventana y abandonó a medias las fantasías para hojear con desgana las páginas de *Portrait Gallery*, pero pronto lo apartó para examinar el pequeño atado de volúmenes. *Beauties of the Spectator, Rasselas, Economía de la vida humana, Las cartas de San Gregario* conocía el contenido de todos ellos; El *anuario cristiano* parecía ser un libro de himnos y lo dejó otra vez. ¿Y quién sería Tomás de Kempis? En alguna ocasión había topado con aquel nombre en sus lecturas y sentía la satisfacción, de todos conocida, de poseer algunas ideas relacionadas con un nombre que vagaba solitario en su memoria. Cogió aquel libro viejo, pequeño y tosco con cierta curiosidad: tenía muchas esquinas dobladas y alguna mano ahora inmóvil para siempre, había señalado algunos párrafos con pluma y tinta, dorada por el paso de los años. Maggie pasó de una página a otra y leyó allí donde la mano señalaba… «Sabe que el amor propio te daña más que ninguna cosa del mundo… Si buscas esto o aquello, y quisieres estar aquí o allí por tu provecho, y propia voluntad, nunca tendrás quietud, ni estarás libre de cuidados; porque en todos hay alguna falta, y en cada lugar habrá quien te ofenda… Vuélvete arriba, vuélvete abajo, vuélvete fuera, vuélvete dentro, y en todo esto hallarás cruz. Y es necesario que en todo lugar tengas paciencia, si quieres tener paz interior, y merecer perpetua corona… Si deseas subir a esta cumbre, conviene comenzar varonilmente, y ponerla segura a la raíz, para que arranques y destruyas la oculta desordenada inclinación que tienes a ti mismo, y a todo bien propio y corporal. De este amor desordenado que se tiene el hombre a sí mismo, depende casi todo lo que se ha de vencer radicalmente: vencido y señoreado este mal, luego hay gran paz y sosiego… Poco es lo que padeces, en comparación con lo que padecieron tantos, tan fuertemente tentados, tan gravemente atribulados, probados y ejercitados de tan diversos modos. Conviénete, pues, traer a la memoria las cosas muy graves de otros, para que fácilmente sufras tus pequeños trabajos. Y si no te parecen pequeños, mira no lo cause tu impaciencia… Bienaventurados los oídos que perciben

los raudales de las inspiraciones divinas, y no cuidan de las murmuraciones mundanas. Bienaventurados los oídos que no escuchan la voz que oyen de fuera, sino la verdad que enseña de dentro».

Un extraño escalofrío de reverencia recorrió a Maggie mientras leía, como si la hubiera despertado una música solemne en plena noche para hablarle de seres cuyas almas bullían mientras la suya se encontraba sumida en el sopor. Pasó de una señal marrón a otra, hacia donde la mano silenciosa parecía señalar, apenas consciente de que estaba leyendo, ya que le parecía oír una voz que le decía: «¿Qué miras aquí no siendo este lugar de tu descanso? En los cielos debe ser tu morada, y como de paso has de mirar todo lo terrestre. Todas las cosas pasan, y tú también con ellas. Guárdate de pegarte a ellas, porque no seas preso y perezcas. Si el hombre diere su hacienda toda, aún no es nada. Si hiciere gran penitencia, aún es poco. Aunque tenga toda la ciencia, aún está lejos: y si tuviere gran virtud. Y muy ferviente devoción, aún le falta mucho; le falta cosa que le es más necesaria. Y ésta ¿cuál es? Que dejadas todas las cosas, deje a sí mismo y salga de sí del todo, y que no le quede nada de amor propio… Muchas veces te dije, y ahora te lo vuelvo a decir: déjate a ti, renúnciate y gozarás de grande paz interior… Entonces se desvanecerán todas las vanas imaginaciones, las perturbaciones malas, y los cuidados superfluos. Entonces también desaparecerá el temor excesivo y morirá el amor desordenad».

Maggie respiró hondo y se echó hacia atrás el pesado cabello, como si quisiera percibir con mayor claridad una visión repentina. Ahí tenía un secreto sobre la vida que le permitiría renunciar a todos los demás; ahí había una cumbre sublime que podría alcanzar sin ayuda externa; el libro podría ofrecerle la posibilidad de obtener perspicacia, fuerza y conquista con los medios que existían en su propia alma, donde un maestro supremo aguardaba para que lo escuchara. Se le ocurrió de repente, como solución a un problema, que todas las desgracias de su corta vida se debían a que había vinculado su corazón a su placer, como si ésa fuera la necesidad central del universo; y por primera vez vio la posibilidad de cambiar una actitud desde la que buscaba la satisfacción de sus deseos, ocuparse menos de sí misma y contemplar su vida como una parte insignificante de un conjunto guiado por una mano divina. Leyó y leyó el viejo libro, devorando con avidez los

diálogos con el invisible maestro, modelo para las penas, fuente de toda fuerza; regresó a él después de que la interrumpieran un momento, y leyó hasta que el sol se ocultó tras los sauces. Con la prisa de una imaginación que no podía descansar en el presente, permaneció sentada en el crepúsculo imaginando situaciones de humillación y devoción y, llevada por el ardor del reciente descubrimiento, la renunciación le parecía la vía de entrada en la satisfacción que durante tanto tiempo había ansiado en vano. No había percibido —¿cómo podría hacerlo tan pronto?— la recóndita verdad de los viejos escritos de aquel monje: que la renunciación es pena, aunque se trate de una pena soportada voluntariamente. Maggie seguía suspirando por la felicidad y se hallaba en éxtasis porque había encontrado la llave. No sabía nada de doctrinas ni sistemas, de misticismo ni de quietismo: pero esa voz procedente de la lejana Edad media era una comunicación directa con las creencias y experiencias de un alma humana y llegó a Maggie como un mensaje incuestionable.

Tal vez sea ése el motivo por el cual este pequeño libro pasado de moda, que se puede comprar en cualquier librería por seis peniques, sigue obrando milagros y convierte en dulzor la amargura; en cambio, otros tratados y sermones más caros y recientes lo dejan todo como estaba. Lo escribió una mano que aguardaba un estímulo para el corazón, es la crónica de una angustia, un combate, una confianza y un triunfo escondidos y solitarios que no se escribió sobre cojines de terciopelo para enseñar a resistir a los que avanzan sobre piedras con los pies ensangrentados. Y sigue siendo un registro duradero de las necesidades y consuelos humanos, la voz de un hermano que, mucho tiempo atrás, sintió, sufrió y renunció, tal vez en el claustro, con hábito de estameña y cabeza tonsurada, con muchos cantos y largos ayunos, y con un modo de hablar distinto del nuestro, pero bajo los mismos cielos silenciosos y lejanos y con los mismos deseos apasionados, los mismos combates, fracasos y cansancios.

Cuando se escribe la historia de familias poco distinguidas, es fácil caer en un tono de énfasis que está muy lejos de ser el propio de la buena sociedad, donde los principios y las creencias no sólo son extremadamente tibios, sino que siempre se dan por supuesto, como algo que no depende de una elección personal y sobre lo que puede hablarse con leve ironía y

desenfado. Pero las clases altas tienen vino de Burdeos y alfombras de terciopelo, compromisos para cenar con seis semanas de antelación, óperas y bailes; pasean su hastío en caballos de pura raza, haraganean en clubes y saben apartarse de los torbellinos de miriñaques; Faraday se ocupa de su ciencia y el alto clero, que es recibido en las mejores casas, se encarga de su religión: ¿cómo van a tener tiempo o necesidad de creencias y énfasis? Pero esta buena sociedad, sustentada en sutiles alas de leve ironía, resulta muy cara de producir; requiere nada menos que una amplia y ardua vida nacional condensada en las fábricas ensordecedoras y poco fragantes, apretujada en las minas, sudorosa en los hornos, que muele, martillea y teje sometida a una opresión variable de ácido carbónico, o bien se extiende por los pastos, se dispersa en casas y chozas solitarias en campos arcillosos o calcáreos plantados con cereales, donde los días lluviosos son sombríos. Esta amplia vida nacional se basa totalmente en el énfasis: el énfasis de la necesidad, que la empuja a todas las actividades necesarias para el mantenimiento de la buena sociedad y la leve ironía: con frecuencia pasa pesados años en un frío sin alfombras, entre disputas familiares y sin largos pasillos que las atenúen. En estas circunstancias, muchas de esas miríadas de almas necesitan de modo imperioso unas creencias enfáticas, ya que la vida, bajo este aspecto desagradable, exige alguna solución, incluso a las mentes poco dadas a la especulación; de la misma manera que uno intenta inspeccionar su lecho cuando alguna protuberancia le molesta, mientras que las plumas y los perfectos muelles franceses no provocan ninguna inquietud. Algunos poseen una fe enfática en el alcohol y buscan el *ekstasis* o «salir de uno mism» en la ginebra, pero los demás necesitan algo que la buena sociedad denomina entusiasmo, algo que empuje a la acción sin premio importante, algo que dé paciencia y alimente el amor humano cuando duele el cuerpo de cansancio y los demás nos contemplan con dureza, algo que, sin duda, se encuentre lejos de los deseos personales, que comporte resignación en lo propio y amor por lo ajeno. De vez en cuando, esta clase de entusiasmo encuentra un eco lejano en una voz que procede de una experiencia nacida de la más profunda necesidad. Y en las duraderas vibraciones de esa voz, Maggie, con su rostro de niña y sus penas ocultas, encontró el esfuerzo y la esperanza que la ayudaron a sobrellevar dos años de soledad y a elaborar

una fe propia sin ayuda de autoridades establecidas ni guías oficiales, porque no los tenía a mano y su necesidad era urgente. Dado lo que conoces de ella, lector, no te sorprenderá que se lanzara a esta empresa de renunciación con cierta exageración y terquedad, impetuosidad y orgullo: su vida seguía siendo para ella un drama teatral y ella exigía interpretar su papel con intensidad. De modo que con frecuencia sucedió que perdiera el espíritu de humildad por lo excesivo de sus actos; muchas veces se propuso volar demasiado alto y cayó con las pobres alas medio desplumadas para chapotear en el barro. Por ejemplo, no sólo decidió ponerse a coser para contribuir un poco a la reserva de la caja de lata sino que, empujada por el deseo de mortificarse, fue a pedir trabajo a una tienda de ropa blanca de Saint Ogg's en lugar de solicitarlo de manera más discreta e indirecta y, cuando Tom le reprochó aquel acto innecesario, no vio en él más que un gesto desagradable e incluso enconado.

—No quiero que mi hermana haga eso —protestó Tom—. Yo ya me encargaré de que se paguen las deudas sin que tengas que rebajarte de ese modo.

Sin duda, estas palabras mundanas y orgullosas eran al mismo tiempo valientes y tiernas, pero Maggie se quedó con la escoria y dejó el oro, y tomó la negativa de Tom como una más de las cruces que debía soportar. Tom era muy duro con ella, pensaba Maggie en sus largas noches de insomnio: con ella, que siempre lo había querido tanto; entonces luchaba por conformarse con esta dureza y no pedir nada más. Ése es el camino que queremos cuando nos disponemos a abandonar el egoísmo: el del martirio y la resistencia, allí donde crecen las palmas de la victoria, en lugar del camino de la tolerancia y la indulgencia, carente de toda gloria. Los viejos libros de Virgilio, Euclides y Aldrich —el marchito fruto del árbol de la ciencia— habían quedado abandonados, porque Maggie había dado la espalda a la vana ambición de compartir los pensamientos de los sabios. En un primer arrebato ardoroso, los tiró con un gesto de triunfo, como si hubiera superado la etapa en que los necesitaba, y si hubieran sido suyos, los habría quemado, convencida de que nunca se arrepentiría. Leía con tanta ansiedad y constancia los otros tres libros —la Biblia, el Kempis y el *Anuario cristiano* (que ya no rechazaba como «libro de himno».)— que

tenía la cabeza llena de citas rítmicas; y se dedicaba a ver la naturaleza y la vida a la luz de su nueva fe con un entusiasmo tal que no necesitaba de ningún otro material para que trabajara su mente mientras se aplicaba con la aguja a la costura de camisas y otras complicadas labores mal llamadas sencillas, que nada sencillas resultaban para Maggie, puesto que bien podía coser el puño al revés cuando pensaba en otra cosa.

Diligentemente inclinada sobre la costura, Maggie ofrecía una imagen que daba gusto mirar. Aquella nueva vida interior, pese a los esporádicos estallidos volcánicos propios de las pasiones contenidas, brillaba en su rostro con una luz suave que hacía más hermosa su juventud floreciente. Su madre advertía el cambio y se maravillaba, asombrada, de que «Maggie se desarrollara tan bie», era sorprendente que aquella niña que había sido tan «contrarios» se convirtiera en una persona tan dócil, tan reacia a imponer su voluntad. En muchas ocasiones, cuando Maggie alzaba la vista de la labor encontraba los ojos de su madre clavados en ella: la miraban y esperaban la amplia mirada de la joven, como si su viejo cuerpo necesitara su calor. La madre empezaba a apreciar a su hija alta y morena, única pieza en la que ahora podía depositar su inquietud y su orgullo, y Maggie, a pesar del deseo ascético de no llevar adornos personales, se veía obligada a ceder ante su madre y lucir las gruesas trenzas en un moño en forma de corona, siguiendo la lamentable moda de aquellos tiempos anticuados.

—Dale gusto a tu madre, hija mía —decía la señora Tulliver—. Bastante me Molesté por tu pelo en otros tiempos.

Así pues, Maggie, contenta de que algo aliviara a su madre y alegrara los largos días que pasaban juntas, consentía en llevar aquel vano adorno y lucía una cabeza regia sobre viejos vestidos, aunque se negaba con firmeza a mirarse al espejo. A la señora Tulliver le gustaba llamar la atención del padre sobre el cabello de Maggie y otras virtudes inesperadas, pero él contestaba con brusquedad:

—Sabía muy bien lo que valía la niña, no es nuevo para mí. Pero es una pena que no sea más vulgar: la rechazarán. No encontrará a nadie digno de ella para casarse.

Y las gracias de cuerpo y alma de Maggie alimentaban su melancolía. Permanecía pacientemente sentado mientras ella le leía un capítulo o,

cuando estaban solos, intentaba explicarle tímidamente que las penas podían resultar bendiciones. Él interpretaba todo ello como parte de la bondad de su hija, lo que hacía más triste su desgracia, pues le había arruinado el futuro. En un espíritu ocupado por un propósito y un afán de venganza insatisfecho, no caben nuevos sentimientos: el señor Tulliver no quería consuelo espiritual, sólo quería librarse de la degradación de las deudas y vengarse.

Libro quinto

El trigo y la cizaña

Capítulo I

En las Fosas Rojas

El salón familiar era una habitación alargada con una ventana en cada extremo; desde una se divisaba la granja y un tramo del curso del Ripple hasta las orillas del Floss, y la otra daba sobre el patio del molino. Maggie estaba sentada con su labor junto a esta última ventana cuando vio entrar en el patio al señor Wakem, montado, como de costumbre, en su bello caballo negro; pero aquella vez no iba solo. Lo acompañaba alguien, cubierto con una capa, sobre un hermoso poni. Maggie apenas tuvo tiempo de advertir que se trataba de Philip cuando estaban ya ante la ventana y el muchacho la saludaba quitándose el sombrero; el padre de Philip percibió el gesto con el rabillo del ojo y giró la cabeza para mirarlos con aire severo.

Maggie se alejó apresuradamente de la ventana y se llevó la labor al piso de arriba; puesto que el señor Wakem algunas veces entraba y examinaba los libros de cuentas, Maggie pensó que la presencia de sus padres despojaría de todo aliciente al encuentro con Philip. Tal vez lo viera algún día, cuando pudiera estrecharle la mano y contarle que se acordaba de lo bueno que había sido con Tom y de todo lo que le había dicho en aquellos tiempos, aunque ahora ya no pudieran ser amigos. A Maggie no le inquietaba volver a ver a Philip: sentía la misma gratitud y piedad que antes y recordaba lo listo que era. Además, durante las primeras semanas de su soledad, había evocado continuamente su imagen junto a la de otras personas que se habían mostrado amables con ella, y con frecuencia deseaba tenerlo por hermano y maestro, tal como habían imaginado en su

charla. Sin embargo, había expulsado aquel deseo junto con otros sueños encaminados a satisfacer su voluntad; además, pensaba que tal vez Philip hubiera cambiado tras su estancia en el extranjero: quizá ahora fuera más mundano y no le importara lo que ella pudiera decirle. No obstante, resultaba agradable comprobar lo poco que había cambiado el rostro de Philip: era sólo una copia ampliada y masculina de los pequeños y pálidos rasgos del niño, con sus mismos ojos grises y el infantil cabello castaño y ondulado; la antigua deformidad suscitaba la misma piedad y, después de tantas meditaciones, Maggie pensó que, sin duda, debería gustarle conversar un poco con él. Tal vez siguiera siendo un muchacho triste, como antes, y deseara que ella lo tratara con afecto. Se preguntó si recordaría lo mucho que admiraba sus ojos. Con este pensamiento, Maggie echó un vistazo al espejo cuadrado condenado a colgar de cara a la pared y estuvo a punto de levantarse para cogerlo; pero se contuvo y tomó la costura, intentando reprimir aquellos deseos con el recuerdo de algunos fragmentos de himnos, hasta que vio que Philip y su padre regresaban por el camino y pudo bajar de nuevo.

Estaban ya a mediados de junio y Maggie tendía a alargar el paseo diario que era ahora el único placer que se permitía; pero aquel día y el siguiente estuvo tan ocupada con un trabajo que debía terminar que no llegó más allá de la puerta de la verja y satisfizo sus deseos sentándose al aire libre. Cuando no tenía que ir a Saint Ogg's, uno de sus paseos más frecuentes, la encaminaba a un lugar situado tras lo que se conocía con el nombre de «la colin». —Una insignificante elevación de terreno coronada de árboles, situada junto al camino que discurría frente a las puertas del molino de Dorlcote—. La denomino insignificante porque apenas era más alta que un montículo; pero en algunos momentos la Naturaleza convierte un mero montículo en un medio para alcanzar un resultado funesto, y por eso te ruego, lector, que imagines este promontorio boscoso que formaba una pared desigual de casi un cuarto de milla, junto al costado izquierdo del molino de Dorlcote, y los agradables campos situados detrás de él y limitados por el rumoroso Ripple. A los pies de la colina nacía un camino que la rodeaba y conducía a la parte posterior, rota en caprichosos hoyos y túmulos por los trabajos de una cantera agotada, abandonada tanto tiempo

atrás que las zarzas y los árboles vestían los agujeros y montículos, y aquí y allá la cubrían las franjas de hierba que unas pocas ovejas mantenían bien corta. En su infancia, Maggie sentía un gran respeto por aquel lugar, llamado «las Fosas Roja», y sólo una gran confianza en el valor de Tom conseguía convencerla para llegar hasta allí, ya que imaginaba bandidos y animales salvajes en cada hoyo. Con todo, ahora aquel lugar tenía para ella el encanto que posee cualquier terreno escarpado, cualquier remedo de rocas y barrancos, para los ojos habituados al llano; especialmente en verano, cuando se sentaba en una hondonada herbosa a la sombra de un frondoso fresno que crecía torcido en un talud, y escuchaba el zumbido de los insectos, diminutas campanillas que adornaban el silencio, o contemplaba cómo el sol atravesaba las ramas lejanas, como si pretendiera hacer regresar a casa el azul cerúleo de los jacintos silvestres, escapado del cielo. También en junio los rosales silvestres florecían en todo su esplendor, y ése fue el motivo de que Maggie se dirigiera hacia las Fosas Rojas en cuanto tuvo un día libre: disfrutaba tanto que algunas veces, en su deseo de renuncia, pensaba que debería poner límite a aquellos paseos.

Si pudieras verla, lector, mientras avanza por su camino favorito y entra en las Fosas por el estrecho sendero que cruza un grupo de pinos albares, distinguirías una figura alta con un viejo traje color lavanda, visible bajo un chal hereditario de malla grande en seda negra; en cuanto está segura de que no la ve nadie, se quita la capota y se la ata al brazo. Se diría que lleva en este mundo más de diecisiete años, tal vez por la lenta y resignada tristeza de su mirada, de la que parece haber desaparecido toda búsqueda e inquietud; quizá porque su torso ancho corresponde al de una mujer joven. La juventud y la salud han resistido bien las penurias voluntarias e involuntarias que le ha deparado el destino, y las noches pasadas sobre el duro suelo a modo de penitencia no han dejado en ella huella evidente: tiene ojos brillantes, mejillas oscuras, firmes y redondas, labios llenos y rojos. Con su tez oscura y la corona azabache que remata su alta figura, parece poseer cierta afinidad con los grandes pinos albares que contempla como si los amara. Pero si se la observa atentamente surge cierta inquietud: produce la sensación de que en ella conviven elementos opuestos entre los que parece inminente una violenta colisión. Sin duda, posee una expresión

apagada, como la que se ve con frecuencia en rostros más maduros, bajo cofias sin adornos, que no encaja con la juventud rebelde que uno esperaría ver aparecer de repente, en una mirada súbita y apasionada que disipara toda la quietud, como un fuego que reviviera cuando parecía ya extinguido.

No obstante, en aquel momento Maggie no se sentía inquieta. Disfrutaba tranquilamente del aire libre mientras alzaba la vista hacia los viejos pinos y pensaba que los extremos rotos de las ramas eran la huella de tormentas pasadas, tras las cuales las rojas ramas apuntaban todavía más arriba. Pero mientras tenía todavía los ojos puestos en lo alto, percibió el movimiento de una sombra que el sol de la tarde proyectó en el sendero herboso situado ante ella. Bajó los ojos sobresaltada y vio a Philip Wakem, que primero la saludó quitándose el sombrero y después, enrojeciendo profundamente, avanzó hacia ella y le tendió la mano. Maggie también se sonrojó con una sorpresa que de inmediato se convirtió en placer. Extendió la mano y bajó la vista hacia la figura deforme, mas menuda que ella, con ojos francos, llenos tan sólo con los recuerdos de sus sentimientos de niña, que nunca había olvidado. Fue ella la primera en hablar.

—Me has asustado —dijo, con una leve sonrisa—. Por aquí nunca encuentro a nadie. ¿Cómo es que paseas por aquí? ¿Has venido a verme?

Era imposible no advertir que Maggie se sentía de nuevo una niña.

—Sí, así es —contestó Philip, todavía algo tenso—. Tenía muchas ganas de verte. Ayer esperé durante largo rato, en la colina cercana a tu casa, para ver si salías, pero no lo hiciste. Hoy he vuelto y cuando he visto el camino que tomabas, no te he perdido de vista y he bajado de la colina. Espero que no te moleste.

—No —dijo Maggie, algo seria, poniéndose otra vez a caminar, como si pretendiera que Philip la acompañara—. Me alegro mucho de que hayas venido, porque deseaba tener la oportunidad de hablar contigo. Nunca he olvidado lo bueno que fuiste hace tiempo con Tom y también conmigo; pero no estaba segura de que tú lo recordaras tan bien como yo. Tom y yo lo hemos pasado muy mal desde entonces, y creo que eso hace que uno piense más en lo que sucedió antes de que llegaran las dificultades.

—No creo que hayas pensado tanto en mí como yo he pensado en ti —contestó Philip tímidamente—. Sabes, cuando estaba lejos de aquí, te retraté

tal como te veía aquella mañana en el estudio, cuando dijiste que nunca me olvidarías.

Philip sacó un estuche del bolsillo y lo abrió. Maggie vio una acuarela en la que aparecía inclinada sobre una mesa, con los mechones negros sujetos tras las orejas, mirando al vacío con ojos extraños y soñadores. El retrato era francamente bueno.

—¡Vaya! —exclamó Maggie, sonriendo y enrojeciendo de placer—. ¡Qué niña tan extraña! Me recuerdo peinada así y con ese vestido rosa. La verdad, parecía una gitana. Diría que todavía lo soy. —Tras una pequeña pausa, añadió—: ¿Ahora soy tal como esperabas?

Aquellas palabras podrían haber sido las de una mujer coqueta, pero la mirada franca y brillante que Maggie volvió hacia Philip no lo era. Deseaba sinceramente que le gustara su rostro tal como era ahora, pero se debía tan sólo a su deseo innato de admiración y amor. Philip la miró a los ojos durante largo rato.

—No, Maggie —contestó en voz baja.

El rostro de Maggie se ensombreció un poco y le tembló ligeramente el labio. Bajó la vista, pero no apartó el rostro y Philip siguió mirándola.

—Eres mucho más hermosa de lo que imaginé que serías —añadió Philip lentamente.

—¿De veras? —preguntó Maggie, y el placer hizo que se sonrojara de nuevo más intensamente. Dejó de mirarlo y dio unos pasos con la vista al frente en silencio, como si estuviera asimilando la idea. Tan acostumbradas están las muchachas a considerar que la vanidad reside en el atuendo que Maggie, al renunciar al espejo, se había propuesto renunciar a todo interés por acicalarse más que a la contemplación de su rostro. Al compararse con las damas jóvenes ricas y elegantes, no se le había ocurrido que bastaba su persona para producir algún efecto. A Philip parecía gustarle el silencio. Caminó a su lado, contemplando su rostro, como si esa visión no le permitiera ningún otro deseo. Habían dejado atrás los pinos y se encontraban ahora en una verde hondonada casi rodeada por un anfiteatro de pálidas rosas silvestres. Pero a medida que la luz se hacía más intensa, el rostro de Maggie se iba apagando. Se detuvo en la hondonada y miró de nuevo a Philip.

—Me habría gustado que pudiéramos ser amigos —dijo con voz seria y triste—: es decir, si nos hubiera parecido oportuno. Pero debo soportar una pesada carga: no puedo conservar nada de lo que amaba cuando era pequeña. Los viejos libros desaparecieron. Ahora Tom es distinto, y también mi padre. Es como si fuera la muerte: debo separarme de todo lo que me importaba antes. Y debo separarme de ti: debemos hacer como si el otro no existiera. Por eso quería hablar contigo. Quería que supieras que Tom y yo no podemos actuar como desearíamos en estas cosas, y que si me comporto como si te hubiera olvidado no se debe a la envidia o al orgullo ni a ningún sentimiento adverso.

Maggie hablaba con voz cada vez más triste y suave, y empezaron a llenársele los ojos de lágrimas. El sufrimiento que expresaba el rostro de Philip hacía que éste se pareciera más al de su infancia y que su deformidad conmoviera más a Maggie.

—Ya lo sé, entiendo lo que dices —contestó él con voz débil por el abatimiento—. Ya sé qué es lo que nos separa por ambas partes. Pero no es justo, Maggie. Y no te ofendas si te llamo por tu nombre y te tuteo, estoy acostumbrado a hacerlo así en mi pensamiento. No es justo sacrificarlo todo a los sentimientos poco razonables de otras personas. Yo renunciaría a muchas cosas por mi padre, pero no renunciaría a una amistad o… a un vínculo de cualquier tipo por obedecer un deseo suyo que a mí no me pareciera justo.

—No lo sé —reflexionó Maggie—. Muchas veces, si me he enfadado o me he disgustado, he creído que no tenía por qué renunciar a nada, y lo he seguido pensando hasta que me he sentido capaz de olvidar mis deberes. Pero no sale nada bueno de eso, es una mala actitud. Estoy segura de que, haga lo que haga, al final preferiré haber renunciado a algo personal antes que haber hecho más difícil la vida de mi padre.

—Pero ¿cómo podría hacerle la vida más difícil que nos viéramos de vez en cuando? —preguntó Philip. Estuvo a punto de decir algo más, pero se contuvo.

—Oh, estoy segura de que no le gustaría. No me preguntes el motivo ni nada sobre ello —contestó Maggie abatida—. Mi padre tiene ideas muy fijas sobre algunas cosas, y ahora es muy desgraciado.

—No más de lo que yo soy —exclamó Philip impetuosamente—. Yo no soy nada feliz.

—¿Por qué? —preguntó Maggie amablemente—. Por lo menos… No debería preguntártelo. Lo siento muchísimo.

Philip se dio media vuelta para seguir caminando, como si no tuviera paciencia para permanecer inmóvil por más tiempo, y siguieron caminando por la hondonada, serpenteando entre árboles y arbustos en silencio. Tras estas últimas palabras de Philip, Maggie no se sintió capaz de insistir de inmediato en que se separaran.

—Desde que renuncié a pensar en lo que es fácil y agradable —dijo finalmente Maggie con timidez— y dejé de mortificarme por no hacer mi propía voluntad, he sido mucho más feliz. Nuestra vida está determinada de antemano y cuando dejamos de desear cosas y sólo pensamos en soportar la carga impuesta y en hacer lo que nos es encomendado, el pensamiento se siente mucho más libre.

—Pero yo no puedo dejar de tener deseos —contestó Philip con impaciencia—. Me parece que, mientras estamos vivos, no podemos dejar de tener deseos y anhelos. Algunas cosas nos parecen bellas y buenas, y tenemos obligatoriamente que desearlas. ¿Cómo podemos sentirnos satisfechos sin ellas mientras nuestros sentimientos sigan vivos? Me entusiasman los cuadros hermosos, deseo ardientemente pintarlos. Por mucho que luche, no soy capaz de hacer lo que quiero. Eso para mí resulta doloroso y será siempre así hasta que vaya perdiendo facultades, como quien pierde la vista. Y también deseo muchas otras cosas… —Philip vaciló un poco al llegar a este punto, y añadió—: …cosas que otros hombres tienen y que a mí siempre se me negarán. Mi vida no tendrá nada grande o hermoso: preferiría no haber nacido.

—¡Oh, Philip! —exclamó Maggie—. Me gustaría que no te sintieras así. —Sin embargo, su corazón empezó a latir al compás del descontento de Philip.

—Entonces —dijo Philip, volviéndose rápidamente y clavando en su rostro los ojos grises y suplicantes—, me conformaría con esta vida si me dejaras verte de vez en cuando —Philip se detuvo al observar el temor que aparecía en el rostro de Maggie y apartó los ojos de nuevo—. No tengo

ningún amigo al que contar mis cosas, nadie que se interese por mí —dijo con más calma—. Y si pudiera verte de vez en cuando, me dejaras hablar un poco contigo, y me mostraras que te interesas por mí, que nuestros corazones siempre podrán ser amigos y que nos ayudaremos, entonces quizá me gustara más la vida.

—Pero ¿cómo podría verte, Philip? —preguntó Maggie, titubeando. (¿De veras podría hacerle algún bien? Sería muy doloroso despedirse de él aquel día y no volver a hablar con él nunca más. Acababa de encontrar un nuevo interés para dar amenidad a sus días y lo cierto era que habría resultado mucho más fácil renunciar a ese nuevo interés antes de que apareciera).

—Si me dejaras verte por aquí de vez en cuando, pasear contigo… Me contentaría con que fuera una o dos veces al mes. Eso no puede estropear la felicidad de nadie y, en cambio, endulzaría mi vida. Además —prosiguió Philip, con toda la astucia e imaginación del amor a los veintiún años—, si hay alguna enemistad entre nuestros familiares, razón de más para que intentemos suavizarla con nuestra amistad. Tal vez, si yo conociera bien los hechos y gracias a nuestra influencia por ambas partes, podríamos sanar las heridas del pasado. Y no creo que mi padre sienta gran enemistad: creo que ha demostrado lo contrario.

Maggie negó lentamente con la cabeza y permaneció en silencio, presa de pensamientos encontrados. Tendía a creer que ver a Philip de vez en cuando y mantener el lazo de la amistad con él era no sólo inocente sino también bueno; quizá pudiera ayudarlo a hallar alguna satisfacción en la vida, como ella había encontrado. La voz que le decía esto sonaba para Maggie como música celestial, pero sobre ella se imponía otra voz, que había aprendido obedecer, que le advertía una y otra vez que aquellos encuentros suponían una relación secreta, algo que temería que descubrieran y, si así era, causaría enfado y dolor, y que admitir algo tan cercano a la doblez actuaría como un cáncer espiritual. Sin embargo, la música se hacía más fuerte, como las campanadas que arrastrara una brisa recurrente, convenciéndola de que eran los otros quienes se equivocaban, con sus errores y sus debilidades, y que se trataba de un sacrificio fútil de uno que lastimaba a otro. Era cruel para Philip que se alejara de él debido a

un injustificable afán de venganza contra su padre: pobre Philip, del que muchos se apartaban por su deformidad. A Maggie no se le había ocurrido la idea de que Philip pudiera convertirse en su enamorado ni que pudieran censurar sus encuentros al considerarlos bajo esa luz; Philip lo advirtió, no sin dolor, aunque así resultara más probable que accediera. Sintió cierta amargura al ver que Maggie se comportaba con él con casi la misma franqueza y libertad que cuando era niña.

—No puedo decirte que sí ni que no —dijo finalmente Maggie, dando media vuelta y volviendo por donde había venido—. Debo esperar para no tomar una decisión equivocada. Debo buscar una guía.

—Entonces, ¿puedo volver? ¿Mañana? ¿Pasado mañana? ¿La semana que viene?

—Me parece que será mejor que te escriba —dijo Maggie, vacilando de nuevo—. Algunas veces tengo que ir a Saint Ogg's y puedo echar la carta al correo.

—¡Oh, no! —exclamó Philip con ansiedad—. No es buena idea. Mi padre podría ver la carta y… aunque creo que no siente ninguna animadversión hacia vosotros, ve las cosas de modo distinto que yo: piensa mucho en la riqueza y en la posición social. Te ruego que me dejes venir otra vez. Di tú cuándo quieres que sea; o, si no puedes, vendré tanto como pueda hasta que te vea.

—Dejémoslo así, pues —dijo Maggie—, porque no estoy segura de que venga ninguna tarde en concreto.

Maggie sintió gran alivio al aplazar la decisión. Ahora podía disfrutar durante unos minutos de su compañía… incluso pensó en prolongarlos un poco: la siguiente vez que se encontraran tendría que herir a Philip comunicándole su decisión.

—No dejo de pensar en lo extraño que resulta que nos hayamos encontrado y hayamos hablado como si nos hubiéramos separado ayer mismo en Lorton —dijo Maggie mirándolo con una sonrisa, tras unos momentos de silencio—. Y, sin embargo, supongo que hemos cambiado mucho durante estos cinco años… me parece que han pasado cinco años. ¿Cómo es que parecías estar seguro de que yo era la misma Maggie? Yo no estaba segura de que tú siguieras siendo el mismo: sé que eres muy

inteligente y seguro que has visto y aprendido muchas cosas que ahora llenan tu pensamiento: no estaba segura de que te interesaras por mí.

—Nunca he dudado un instante de que seguirías siendo la misma —dijo Philip—. Es decir, la misma en todo aquello que hizo que me gustaras más que ninguna otra persona. No quiero explicarlo: no creo que se pueda explicar por qué algunas cosas nos impresionan más que otras. No podemos detectar el proceso por el cual llegan a nosotros ni el modo en que actúan. El pintor más grande que ha existido sólo pintó una vez un niño misteriosamente divino, y no sería capaz de explicar cómo lo hizo ni nosotros podemos explicar por qué sentimos que es divino. Me parece que en nuestra naturaleza humana hay almacenes de los que la razón no puede hacer un inventario completo. Algunos fragmentos de música me afectan de modo tan extraño que no puedo escucharlos sin que cambie mi estado de ánimo durante un si el efecto durara sería capaz de actos heroicos.

—¡Ah! Sé muy bien lo que quieres decir con la música, yo también lo siento —exclamó Maggie, uniendo las manos, movida por su antigua impetuosidad—, por lo menos, así me sentía cuando oía música. Ahora ya no puedo oír nada, excepto el órgano de la iglesia —añadió, entristecida.

—¿Y te gustaría, Maggie? —preguntó Philip, mirándola con cariñosa lástima—. Ah, disfrutas de muy pocas cosas hermosas de la vida. ¿Tienes libros? Cuando eras pequeña te gustaban mucho.

Se encontraban ya de regreso en la hondonada en torno a la cual crecían los rosales silvestres y ambos se detuvieron bajo el encanto de la feérica luz del atardecer que reflejaban las matas de color rosa pálido.

—No, he dejado de leer —contestó Maggie con voz tranquila—; ahora sólo leo unos pocos libros.

Philip había sacado ya del bolsillo un pequeño volumen y dijo mientras examinaba el lomo.

—Ah, éste es el segundo volumen. Tal vez te habría gustado llevártelo. Me lo metí en el bolsillo porque estoy estudiando una escena para dibujarla.

Maggie miró también el lomo y vio el título: le hizo recordar una antigua impresión con imperiosa fuerza.

—El pirata[25] —dijo, tomando el libro de las manos de Philip—. Oh, lo empecé una vez, leí hasta cuando Minna camina con Cleveland, pero no

pude terminarlo. Me imaginé el resto e inventé varios finales, todos ellos desgraciados. No se me ocurría ningún final feliz con ese principio. ¡Pobre Minna! Me pregunto cómo termina de verdad. Durante un tiempo, no pude quitarme de la cabeza las islas Shetland, sentía el viento que soplaba del mar encrespado —dijo Maggie rápidamente, con ojos refulgentes.

—Llévate el libro a casa, Maggie —dijo Philip, contemplándola con placer—. Ahora no lo necesito: en lugar de pintar esa escena, haré un retrato tuyo bajo los pinos y las sombras tangenciales.

Maggie no había oído ni una palabra de lo que había dicho, absorta en la lectura de la página por la cual había abierto el libro. De repente, cerró el libro y se lo devolvió a Philip moviendo la cabeza en gesto de rechazo, como si dijera *vade retro* a una visión.

—Llévatelo, Maggie —insistió Philip—, te gustará.

—No, gracias —contestó Maggie, apartándolo con la mano y caminando de nuevo—. Volvería a enamorarme de este mundo, como antes; haría que deseara ver y conocer muchas cosas, haría que deseara una vida plena.

—Pero no siempre vivirás como ahora, ¿por qué has de privarte así? No me gusta verte entregada a este ascetismo tan estricto, Maggie. La poesía, el arte y el conocimiento son sagrados y puros.

—Pero no son para mí, no son para mí —insistió Maggie, caminando más deprisa—. Porque yo querría demasiado. Tengo que esperar, esta vida no durará tanto.

—No huyas de mí sin despedirte, Maggie —exclamó Philip cuando alcanzaron el bosquecillo de pinos albares y ella siguió caminando sin hablar—. No debo seguir adelante, me parece, ¿no es así?

—¡Oh, no! Se me había olvidado. Adiós —dijo Maggie, deteniéndose y tendiéndole la mano. Este gesto provocó en ella una oleada de cariño hacia Philip y, después de mirarse en silencio durante unos momentos, con las manos unidas, Maggie dijo retirando la mano: Te agradezco mucho que hayas pensado en mí durante estos años. Es muy agradable que alguien te quiera. Qué maravilloso, qué hermoso es que Dios te haya dado un corazón capaz de interesarse por una niña rara con la que sólo tuviste trato durante

unas semanas. Recuerdo que te dije que me parecía que sentías por mí más cariño que Tom.

—Ah, Maggie —dijo Philip, casi quejoso—: nunca me querrás tanto como a tu hermano.

—Tal vez no —contestó Maggie con sencillez—. Pero es que en el recuerdo más antiguo que tengo estamos Tom y yo junto al Floss mientras él me coge de la mano. Todo lo anterior es oscuridad. Pero nunca te olvidaré, aunque debamos seguir separados.

—No digas eso, Maggie —protestó Philip—. Si he mantenido a aquella niña durante cinco años en mi recuerdo, ¿no he conseguido con ello parte de su cariño? No debería alejarse tanto de mí.

—No lo haría si fuera libre, pero no lo soy. Debo rendirme —dijo Maggie. Tras un momento de duda, añadió—: Y quería decirte que, cuando veas a mi hermano, es mejor que te limites a saludarlo inclinando la cabeza. Una vez me dijo que no volviera a hablar contigo y él no cambia de opinión… Oh, vaya. Se ha puesto ya el sol y estoy todavía lejos. Adiós —dijo tendiéndole otra vez la mano.

—Vendré por aquí tanto como pueda hasta que vuelva a verte, Maggie. Piensa tanto en mí como en los demás.

—Si, sí, lo haré —dijo Maggie. Se alejó a toda prisa y no tardó en desaparecer tras el último pino, aunque la mirada de Philip permaneció fija en aquel lugar durante varios minutos, como si todavía la viera.

Maggie se dirigió a su casa sumida en un conflicto interno; Philip se marchó a la suya, donde no hizo más que recordar y esperar. Sin duda, debemos censurar severamente su actitud. Tenía cuatro o cinco años más que Maggie y era plenamente consciente de sus sentimientos hacia ella, lo que debía ayudarlo a prever el carácter que cualquier observador podría atribuir a sus encuentros. Pero no debe suponer el lector que Philip fuera capaz de un tosco egoísmo, o que pudiera quedar satisfecho sin convencerse previamente de que pretendía insuflar cierta felicidad en la vida de Maggie; y esta idea lo empujaba más que cualquier otro objetivo personal. Podía darle comprensión y apoyo. La actitud de Maggie no albergaba la menor promesa de amor hacia él, sólo la misma ternura propia de una niña dulce que había mostrado a los doce años. Quizá nunca lo amara; quizá ninguna

mujer podría nunca llegar a amarlo: bien, lo soportaría entonces, pero al menos tendría la felicidad de verla y de sentir cierta cercanía. Y Philip se aferraba apasionadamente a la posibilidad de que pudiera llegar a amarlo: tal vez ese sentimiento se desarrollara si lo asociaba con la atenta ternura a la que su carácter era tan sensible. Si alguna mujer podía quererlo, sin duda ésa era Maggie: estaba llena de amor y nadie parecía reclamarlo. Así pues… era una pena que un talento como el suyo se marchitara en plena juventud, como un árbol joven en pleno bosque que careciera de la luz y del espacio necesarios para crecer bien. Se preguntaba si no podría impedirlo y convencerla de que abandonara sus privaciones. Sería su ángel de la guarda; haría cualquier cosa, soportaría cualquier cosa por ella, excepto dejar de verla.

Capítulo II

La tía Glegg se entera del tamaño del pulgar de Bob

Mientras los combates vitales de Maggie se libraban casi por completo en el interior de su alma, donde luchaban dos ejércitos de sombras y se alzaban de nuevo los fantasmas caídos, Tom combatía en una guerra más polvorienta y ruidosa, lidiaba con obstáculos más sólidos y obtenía conquistas más concretas. Así ha sido desde los días de Hécuba y de Héctor, domador de caballos: en el interior de la casa, las mujeres de cabello ondeante y manos alzadas al cielo ofrecían plegarias, contemplaban el combate del mundo desde lejos y llenaban los días largos y vacíos con recuerdos y temores; en el exterior, los hombres, en feroz lucha contra lo divino y lo humano, sofocaban los recuerdos bajo los propósitos y perdían la noción del temor e incluso del riesgo de caer heridos en el apresurado ardor de la acción.

De lo que has visto de Tom, lector, podemos concluir que se trata de un muchacho al que nadie profetizaría un fracaso en lo que deseara firmemente emprender: probablemente, las apuestas estarían de su parte a pesar del escaso éxito que había tenido con los clásicos. Lo cierto era que Tom nunca había deseado alcanzar el éxito en ese terreno: y para obtener una buena cosecha de estupidez, no hay nada como sembrar en un cerebro una serie de asuntos que no le interesen. Sin embargo, ahora la poderosa voluntad de Tom, concentrando los esfuerzos y superando los desalientos, había unido la integridad, el orgullo, los pesares familiares y la ambición personal y los había convertido en una fuerza. El tío Deane, que lo observaba atentamente,

pronto empezó a albergar esperanzas sobre él y a sentirse orgulloso de haber colocado en la empresa a un sobrino que parecía estar hecho para el comercio. Tom, en cuanto su tío empezó a insinuar que transcurrido un tiempo, tal vez se le encargaría algún viaje en determinadas temporadas y la compra para la empresa de algunas mercancías vulgares —que prefiero no mencionar para no ofender a los oídos delicados— advirtió que había sido un gesto amable por su parte emplearlo de entrada en el almacén; y, sin duda, pensando en ello, el señor Deane, cuando tenía previsto tomar a solas un vasito de oporto, invitaba a Tom a pasar con él una hora, que dedicaba a sermonear e instruirlo sobre los artículos de exportación e importación, con alguna digresión ocasional de utilidad indirecta sobre las ventajas relativas que para los comerciantes de Saint Ogg's suponía que les trajeran las mercancías en bodegas propias o extranjeras, tema que al señor Deane, en su condición de naviero, hacía soltar chispas en cuanto se calentaba con la conversación y el vino. Durante el segundo año, aumentó el salario de Tom, pero todo, excepto lo que costaba la comida y la ropa, iba a parar a la caja de lata de su casa, y el joven rehuía la camaradería por temor a que lo empujara a gastos no deseados. Con todo, Tom no encajaba en el bobo modelo del «aprendiz industrios»; deseaba ardientemente algunos placeres, le habría gustado ser domador de caballos y ofrecer una figura distinguida ante los ojos del vecindario, repartir bienes y prebendas con calculada generosidad y ser considerado uno de los jóvenes más refinados de la región; más aún, estaba decidido a conseguir todo eso tarde o temprano. Pero su astucia le decía que los medios para lograrlo exigían que se sacrificara en aquel momento: debía superar determinadas etapas y una de las primeras era el pago de las deudas de su padre. Tras tomar esta decisión, siguió adelante sin vacilar, envuelto en cierta severidad saturnina, tal como hace un hombre joven cuando se le exige de modo prematuro que se muestre responsable. Tom sentía intensamente esa necesidad de hacer causa común con su padre que se deriva del orgullo familiar, y se concentraba en comportarse como un hijo irreprochable; pero la experiencia que iba adquiriendo le hacía condenar en silencio la imprudencia e irreflexión de la conducta pasada de su padre: no tenían caracteres afines y el rostro de Tom, no se mostraba muy alegre durante las horas que pasaba en casa. Maggie

sentía por él un respeto reverencial y aunque luchaba para combatirlo, porque era consciente de que ella poseía pensamientos más amplios. Y motivos más profundos, era inútil. Un carácter en armonía consigo mismo, que logra lo que se propone, domina los impulsos opuestos y no se plantea nada imposible, es fuerte gracias a lo que niega.

Como bien puedes imaginar, lector, las diferencias entre Tom y su padre, cada vez más obvias, sirvieron para reconciliarlo con las tías y los tíos maternos; y los informes y predicciones favorables del señor Deane al señor Glegg en relación con la aptitud de Tom para los negocios empezaron a ser tema de conversación entre ellos con distintos grados de convicción. Al parecer, Tom era capaz de hacer honor a la familia sin causar gasto ni problema alguno. A la señora Pullet siempre le había parecido extraño que la excelente tez de Tom, tan propia de los Dodson, no fuera indicio de que el muchacho acabaría saliendo bien, y que errores juveniles tales como correr tras el pavo real y la falta de respeto general a sus tías sólo indicaban la presencia de unas gotas de la sangre de los Tulliver que, sin duda, se habían diluido al crecer. El señor Glegg, que había contraído un prudente afecto por Tom al comprobar la actitud enérgica y sensata de éste cuando subastaron los objetos de la casa, comunicó que abrigaba una decisión para favorecer sus perspectivas más adelante, cuando se le ofreciera la posibilidad de hacerlo de modo prudente y sin grandes pérdidas; pero la señora Glegg destacó que ella no era dada a hablar sin autoridad, como otras personas, y que quienes menos hablaban, más éxito acostumbraban a tener, y que cuando llegara el momento, ya se vería quién podía hacer algo mejor que hablar. El tío Pullet, tras meditar en silencio durante varios caramelitos, llegó claramente a la conclusión de que cuando era probable que un joven se desenvolviera adecuadamente, lo mejor era no inmiscuirse en sus cosas.

Entre tanto, Tom no había mostrado ninguna disposición a confiar en nadie más que en sí mismo aunque, con una natural sensibilidad hacia los indicios de opiniones favorables, se alegraba de que su tío pasara por su trabajo a hacerle alguna visita y que lo convidara a comer a su casa, aunque generalmente prefería rechazar la invitación con el pretexto de que tal vez

no fuera puntual. No obstante, un año atrás había sucedido algo que indujo a Tom a poner a prueba la disposición amistosa del tío Glegg.

Bob Jakin, que pocas veces olvidaba visitar a Tom y a Maggie cuando regresaba de uno de sus recorridos, una tarde esperó a Tom en el puente cuando volvía a casa desde Saint Ogg's con intención de mantener una conversación en privado. Se tomó la libertad de preguntar al señor Tom si alguna vez se le había ocurrido ganar dinero comerciando un poco por su cuenta. ¿Comerciar? ¿Cómo?, quiso saber Tom. Caramba, pues enviando una carga a algún puerto extranjero; Bob tenía un amigo que le había ofrecido ayudarlo con mercancías de Laceham y que de buen grado ayudaría al señor Tom en las mismas condiciones. Tom se interesó de inmediato y le pidió que le diera más detalles, sorprendido de que no se le hubiera ocurrido a él antes esa idea. Le agradaba tanto el proyecto de una especulación que pudiera cambiar el lento proceso de la suma por el de la multiplicación que decidió de inmediato tratar el asunto con su padre y conseguir su consentimiento para tomar parte de los ahorros de la caja y comprar un pequeño cargamento. Habría preferido no tener que consultar a su padre, pero acababa de depositar hasta la última moneda en la caja de lata y no tenía otro remedio. Allí estaban todos los ahorros: el señor Tulliver no querría de ningún modo colocar el dinero para que produjera interés por temor a perderlo. Desde que una vez especuló comprando grano y perdió la inversión, no se sentía seguro si no tenía el dinero al alcance de la mano.

Aquella noche, mientras estaba sentado frente a la chimenea, Tom abordó la cuestión con cuidado, y el señor Tulliver escuchó, inclinado hacia delante en el sillón y mirándolo a la cara con expresión escéptica. Su primer impulso fue negarse en redondo, pero sentía cierto respeto por los deseos de Tom y, dado que tenía la sensación de ser un padre «funest», ya no tenía la misma imperiosa necesidad de mandar. Sacó del bolsillo la llave del escritorio, extrajo la llave del arcón y tomó la caja de lata lentamente, como si intentara retrasar el momento de una dolorosa separación. Después volvió a sentarse ante la mesa y abrió la caja con la llavecita del candado con la que jugueteaba en el bolsillo del chaleco siempre que tenía un rato libre. Allí estaban los sucios billetes de banco y los brillantes soberanos, y los

contó sobre la mesa: tras tanto escatimar durante dos años, sólo habían conseguido ahorrar ciento dieciséis libras.

—Entonces, ¿cuánto quieres? —preguntó, hablando como si las palabras le abrasaran los labios.

—¿Qué le parece que empiece con treinta y seis libras, padre? —preguntó Tom.

El señor Tulliver separó esa cantidad del resto.

—Es todo lo que ahorro de mi paga en un año —dijo sin quitar la mano de encima.

—Sí, padre. Es muy lento ahorrar con lo poco que ganamos. Y, de esa manera, podremos doblar nuestros ahorros.

—Ah, muchacho —dijo el padre, sin levantar la mano del dinero—. Pero podrías perderlo, podrías perder un año de mi vida, y no me quedan muchos.

Tom permaneció en silencio.

—Y sabes que no quise pagar dividendos con las primeras cien libras, porque quería verlas todas juntas y, cuando las veo, me siento más tranquilo. Si confías en la suerte, seguro que estará en mi contra. Es Pero Botero quien tiene la suerte en sus manos. Y si pierdo un año, nunca lo recuperaré, la muerte podría llevárseme —dijo con voz temblorosa.

—En ese caso, padre —dijo Tom tras unos minutos de silencio—, ya que pone tantas objeciones, no seguiré adelante.

Sin embargo, no deseaba abandonar el proyecto por completo, de modo que resolvió pedir al tío Glegg que le prestara veinte libras a cambio del cinco por ciento de los beneficios. No era mucho pedir. Así que cuando Bob pasó al día siguiente por el muelle para saber qué decisión había tomado, Tom le propuso que fueran juntos a ver al tío Glegg para iniciar el negocio; seguía siendo un chico tímido y orgulloso y tenía la sensación de que la lengua de Bob haría que se sintiera más seguro.

Como es natural, en aquella hora agradable, las cuatro de la tarde de un cálido día de agosto, el señor Glegg estaba contando los frutos de sus árboles para asegurarse de que el número total no había variado desde el día anterior. Tom se le acercó junto a lo que al señor Glegg le pareció una compañía poco recomendable: un hombre con un saco al hombro —ya que

Bob estaba preparado para emprender otro viaje— y un enorme bull-terrier manchado que caminaba contoneándose lentamente y miraba con los ojos entrecerrados, con una hosca indiferencia que bien podría ocultar las intenciones más aviesas. Las gafas del señor Glegg, que lo habían ayudado a contar los frutos, destacaron estos detalles sospechosos de modo alarmante.

—¡Eh, eh! ¡Que se vaya ese perro! —gritó, agarrando un palo y sosteniéndolo ante él como protección en cuanto los visitantes se encontraron a tres yardas de distancia.

—Largo *Mumps* —ordenó Bob, dándole una patada—. Es tranquilo como un corderito. —*Mumps* corroboró la observación con un largo gruñido mientras se replegaba tras las piernas de su amo.

—¡Vaya! ¿Qué significa esto, Tom? —preguntó el señor Glegg—. ¿Sabes algo de los sinvergüenzas que me cortan los árboles? —Si Bob acudía como «informado», entonces el señor Glegg podría tolerar alguna irregularidad.

—No, señor —dijo Tom—. Hemos venido a hablar de un pequeño negocio que me interesa.

—Ah, bien. Pero ¿qué tiene que ver el perro con eso? —preguntó el anciano caballero, volviendo a mostrarse amable.

—El perro es mío —intervino Bob con su habitual rapidez—. Y soy yo quien ha *contao* al señor Tom lo *d'*ese negocio, porque el señor Tom ha sido amigo mío desde que era un crío: mi primer trabajo fue espantar a los pájaros *pa* el viejo amo. Y siempre pienso que, si se presenta la buena suerte, dejaré que el señor Tom también se aproveche. Y es una verdadera pena que si se presenta la oportunidad *d'*hacer algún dinero enviando género fuera, con un diez o doce por ciento de beneficio después de pagar los costes de flete y las comisiones, no pueda hacerlo porque no tiene dinero. Y son géneros de Laceham, a ver, que están hechos a propósito *pa* gente que quiera enviar una pequeña partida: son ligeros y no ocupan sitio; el paquete de veinte libras ni se ve, y son *manufaturas* que gustan a cualquiera, de manera que es fácil venderlas. Y yo iré a Laceham y compraré los productos pa el señor Tom y *pa* mí, y el encargado de un carguero se ocupará de ellos, lo conozco personalmente, es un buen hombre

y tiene familia aquí, en el pueblo: se llama Salt y, como es natural, es un individuo muy *salao* y de fiar; si no se lo cree, puedo acompañarlo a que lo vea.

El tío Glegg escuchó con la boca abierta de sorpresa el locuaz discurso de Bob, que apenas comprendía. Lo miró primero por encima de las gafas, después por debajo y luego otra vez por encima; entre tanto, Tom, inseguro de la opinión que tendría su tío, empezó a desear no haber llevado a aquel Aarón o portavoz. La charla de Bob le parecía menos convincente ahora que la oía ante otra persona.

—Parece usted muy entendido —dijo el señor Glegg finalmente.

—Pues sí, señor, eso es —prosiguió Bob, asintiendo—. Como que me parece que tengo la cabeza viva por adentro, como si fuera un queso viejo, porque estoy tan lleno de planes que uno choca con otro. Si no tuviera a Mumps *pa* hablar, me se llenaría tanto que me daría un ataque. Será porque nunca fui demasiado al colegio. Es lo que yo digo a mi madre: «Debería haberme enviado más al colegio, entonces podría leer *pa* distraerme y tendría la cabeza más fría y vací». Vaya, ahora está bien y cómoda, mi vieja, come carne asada y habla *to* lo que quiere. Porque estoy ganando tanto que tendré que casarme *pa* que lo gaste mi mujer, pero es una lata tener mujer, y a Mumps a lo mejor no le gusta.

El tío Glegg que, desde que se había retirado de los negocios se consideraba un hombre jocoso, empezaba a encontrar divertido a Bob, pero todavía tenía que hacer un comentario desaprobador que lo mantenía serio.

—Ah, me parece que no sabe usted cómo gastar su dinero; si no, no tendría ese perrazo, que comerá como dos cristianos. ¡Es una vergüenza, es una vergüenza! —exclamó, más triste que enfadado. Y añadió rápidamente —: Pero vamos, oigamos más cosas sobre este negocio, Tom. Imagino que quieres un poco de dinero para probar fortuna. Pero ¿dónde está el tuyo? No te lo gastarás todo, ¿verdad?

—No, señor —contestó Tom sonrojándose—. Pero mi padre no desea arriesgarlo y yo no quiero insistir. Si pudiera conseguir veinte o treinta libras para empezar, podría pagar el cinco por ciento y así, gradualmente, formar un pequeño capital propio y seguir adelante sin préstamos.

—Vaya, vaya —dijo el señor Glegg con tono de aprobación—. No es una mala idea, y no te digo que no sea yo la persona indicada. Pero preferiría ver a ese Salt del que habláis. Y el amigo aquí presente *s'*ofrece a comprar el género… ¿Si le damos el dinero, *l'*avalará alguien? —añadió el precavido anciano, mirando a Bob por encima de las gafas.

—Me parece que no es necesario, tío —dijo Tom—. Por lo menos, para mí no sería necesario, porque conozco bien a Bob; pero quizá usted sí quiera alguna garantía.

—Usted se quedará con algún porcentaje de la compra, supongo —dijo el señor Glegg, mirando a Bob.

—No, señor —contestó Bob indignado—. No *l'*he ofrecido al señor Tom una manzana *pa* llevarme un *bocao*. Cuando engaño a otro lo hago con más ingenio.

—Pero si es perfectamente correcto que usted tenga un pequeño porcentaje —dijo el señor Glegg—. No soy partidario de las *transaciones* en las que la gente trabaja a cambio de nada.

—Bien, pues —contestó Bob, que gracias a su agudeza vio de inmediato a qué se refería—: le diré lo que saco yo *d'*esto que, al final, *m'*hará *tamién* ganar dinero. Si hago compras mayores, gano consideración: ése es mi plan. Soy un tipo listo.

—Glegg, Glegg —espetó una voz severa desde la ventana abierta del salón—. ¿Te importaría venir a tomar el té? ¿O piensas seguir charlando con buhoneros hasta que te asesinen a plena luz del día?

—¿Asesinen? —preguntó el señor Glegg—. ¿De qué habla esta mujer? Aquí está tu sobrino Tom hablando de negocios.

—Pues sí, de que te asesinen. No hace mucho se juzgó el caso de un buhonero que asesinó a una joven, le robó el dedal y tiró el cadáver a una cuneta.

—No, no —protestó el señor Glegg con tono tranquilizador—: te refieres a un hombre sin piernas que iba en un carrito tirado por un perro.

—Bueno, es lo mismo, Glegg, pero tú te empeñas en llevarme la contraria. Y si mi sobrino ha venido a hablar de negocios, sería más adecuado que lo hicieras pasar a la casa y permitieras que su tía se enterara,

en lugar de murmurar por los rincones como si conspirarais o tramarais algo.

—Bien, bien —accedió el señor Glegg—, ahora entramos.

—No es necesario que se quede —dijo la dama dirigiéndose a Bob con voz fuerte, más adecuada a la distancia moral que los separaba que a la física—. No queremos nada. Yo no compro a los buhoneros. Y cierre bien la puerta del jardín al salir.

—Alto, no vaya tan aprisa, señora Glegg —dijo el señor Glegg—. Todavía no he terminado con el joven. Pasa, Tom, pasa —añadió, entrando por una puerta ventana.

—Glegg —declaró la señora Glegg en tono de fatalidad—: si tienes intención de permitir que este hombre y su perro me pisen la alfombra delante de mis narices, *has* el favor de comunicármelo. Supongo que una esposa tiene el derecho a saberlo.

—No se inquiete, señora mía —dijo Bob, tocándose la gorra. Advirtió de inmediato que la señora Glegg era una pieza digna de cazarse y se aprestó a ello—. *Mumps y* yo nos quedaremos aquí, en la gravilla. *Mumps* sabe con quién trata, ni que le silbe durante una hora se tirará sobre una verdadera señora como *usté*. Hay que ver cómo reconoce a las damas hermosas, Y le gustan especialmente las de buena figura. A ver, —añadió Bob, depositando el fardo en la gravilla—, es una lástima que una dama como usté no trate con buhoneros en lugar de ir a esas tiendas modernas donde hay media docena de caballeros con la barbilla bien tiesa por el cuello duro, que parecen botellas con tapones *d'*adorno, que tienen que sacar *d'*un trozo de percal pa comer. No es razonable que pague tres veces lo que pagaría a un buhonero, pues ésa es la manera natural de comprar porque no paga alquiler y no tiene que soltar una mentira tras otra quiera o no quiera. Pero señora, *usté* sabe mejor que yo lo que es bueno, seguro que adivina las intenciones de los tenderos.

—Pues sí, claro que sí. Y también de los vendedores ambulantes —observó la señora Glegg, con intención de dejar claro que los halagos de Bob no habían producido en ella el menor efecto; entre tanto, su esposo, que permanecía en pie detrás de ella, con las manos en los bolsillos y las

piernas separadas, sonrió y guiñó un ojo con deleite conyugal ante la probabilidad de que embaucaran a su esposa.

—Sí, seguro, señora —dijo Bob—. ¡A ver! Seguro que ha tratado con cientos de buhoneros cuando era muchacha, antes de que el señor aquí presente tuviera la suerte de poner los ojos en *usté*. Sé dónde vivía, he visto la casa muchas veces, cerca del señor Darleigh, una casa de piedra con escaleras…

—Ah, así era —dijo la señora Glegg, sirviendo el té—. Entonces, conoce un poco a mi familia… ¿es pariente de aquel buhonero con un ojo bizco que traía lino irlandés?

—¡Ahí está! —exclamó Bob, eludiendo la pregunta—. Si ya sabía yo que las mejores compras de su vida habían sido a algún buhonero. ¡A ver! Si hasta un buhonero bizco es mejor que un tendero con los ojos rectos. Pardiez, ojalá hubiera tenido la suerte de visitar la casa de piedra con este fardo… —dijo, inclinándose y asestando un enfático puñetazo en el saco—, mientras las hermosas jóvenes esperaban en los escalones de piedra… cómo me habría gustado enseñarles mi fardo. Ahora, los buhoneros sólo pasan por casas pobres, si no es por las criadas. Qué tiempos tan malos éstos, señora. Mire los algodones estampados que se llevan ahora y cómo eran cuando usté los llevaba. Seguro que usté no se pondrá nada *d'*eso. Tiene que ser de primera, la tela que usté compre, algo que lleve con gusto.

—Sí, mejores que los que usted tiene, sin duda: no creo que tenga nada de primera, excepto el descaro —dijo la señora Glegg, convencida de su sagacidad insuperable—. Glegg, ¿piensas sentarte a tomar el té? Tom, toma esta taza.

—En eso ha tenido razón, señora —dijo Bob—, mi fardo no es *pa* damas como usté. Ya pasaron esos tiempos. Ahora llevamos gangas baratísimas, con alguna tara aquí o allá, que puede cortarse o que no se ve una vez puesto; pero nada bueno *pa* ofrecer a las personas ricas que pagan por lo que nadie ve. Yo no soy *d'*esos que querrían enseñarle su mercancía, señora: no, no; yo soy un tipo insolente, como *usté* dice, porque estos tiempos que corren nos hacen insolentes, pero no tanto.

—Bueno, ¿qué telas lleva en el fardo? —preguntó la señora Glegg—. Tejidos de colores, supongo; chales y todo eso.

—De todo tipo, señora, de todo tipo —dijo Bob, dando un golpe al hatillo—. Pero no hablemos más *d'*eso, si *usté* quiere. Estoy aquí por los negocios del señor Tom y no soy *d'*esos que ocupan el tiempo de los demás con sus asuntos.

—Pues hagan el favor de decirme en qué consiste ese negocio que me quieren ocultar —dijo la señora Glegg que, acosada por una doble curiosidad, se veía obligada a posponer una de ellas.

—Un pequeño plan de nuestro sobrino Tom, aquí presente —dijo él señor Glegg con aire afable—, y no del todo malo, creo yo. Un *proyeto* para ganar dinero qué es justo la clase de plan adecuado para los jóvenes que tienen que labrarse un futuro, ¿verdad, Jane?

—Espero que en su plan no cuente con que sus parientes se encarguen de todo, pues así es como piensan ahora los jóvenes. Les ruego que me cuenten qué tiene que ver este buhonero con lo que sucede en nuestra familia. ¿Es que no puedes hablar por ti mismo, Tom, e informar a tu tía, como debe hacer un sobrino?

—Este joven se llama Bob Jakin, tía —explicó Tom, dominando la irritación que le producía la tía Glegg—. Y lo conozco desde qué éramos niños. Es muy buen muchacho y siempre está dispuesto a hacer algo por mí. Y tiene cierta experiencia en esto de enviar manufacturas a otros lugares en pequeñas cantidades; y cree que si yo hiciera lo mismo, podría ganar algún dinero. Así se obtiene un elevado interés.

—¿Un gran interés? —preguntó la tía Glegg con entusiasmo.

—¿Y a qué llamas tú un gran interés?

—Al diez o doce por ciento, dice Bob, tras pagar todos los gastos.

—En ese caso, ¿por qué no se me ha comunicado antes, Glegg? —preguntó la señora Glegg, volviéndose hacia su marido con un chirriante tono de reproche—. ¿No me has dicho siempre que no es posible obtener más del cinco por ciento?

—Bah, bah, tonterías, mujer —contestó él señor Glegg—. Tú no puede meterte en negocios, ¿verdad? No se puede obtener más del cinco por ciento con seguridad.

—Pero yo sí puedo ocuparme de su dinero, y muy agradecido, señora —dijo Bob—, si *usté* desea arriesgarlo, aunque tampoco puede decirse que

sea un verdadero riesgo. Pero si *usté* quisiera prestar un poco de dinero al señor Tom, él le pagaría el seis o el siete por ciento y ganaría también un pellizco *pa* él, y a una dama bondadosa como *usté* le gustará más el negocio si su sobrino participa en él.

—¿Qué dices, señora Glegg? —preguntó el señor Glegg—. Me parece que, después de hacer algunas averiguaciones, ayudaré a Tom con un poquito de cúmquibus para empezar, me pagará intereses, y si tienes por ahí alguna cantidad metida en un calcetín o algo así…

—¡Glegg!, ¡esto es inconcebible! Eres capaz de ir por ahí informando a los vagabundos para que puedan venir a robarme.

—Bien, bien. Como decía, si quisieras aportar veinte libras, bien podrías hacerlo: yo las aumentaría hasta cincuenta. Sería un buen punto de partida, ¿no, Tom?

—Espero que no cuentes conmigo, Glegg —dijo su esposa—. No dudo de que, con mi dinero, puedes hacer grandes cosas.

—Pues muy bien —contestó el señor Glegg, algo irritado—, entonces, lo haremos sin ti. Iré con usted a ver a ese Salt —añadió, volviéndose hacia Bob.

—Y ahora, imagino que te irás al otro extremo, Glegg —dijo la señora Glegg—, y querrás excluirme del negocio con mi sobrino. No he dicho nunca que no quisiera poner dinero, y no digo si serán o no esas veinte libras, aunque tú te das mucha prisa en opinar por mí, pero algún día Tom se dará cuenta de que su tía tiene razón al no arriesgar, hasta que se demuestre que no se va a perder, el dinero que ha ahorrado para él.

—Sí, ése es un riesgo agradable —dijo el señor Glegg, guiñando el ojo a Tom indiscretamente, el cual no pudo reprimir una sonrisa. Pero Bob contuvo él estallido de la ofendida dama.

—Caramba, señora —intervino con aire de admiración—, *usté* sí que sabe cómo hacer las cosas. Y está en *to* su derecho. Primero mira cómo funciona él negocio y después toma una generosa decisión. Pardiez, es buena cosa esa de tener buenos parientes. Yo gané mi cúmquibus, como dice el señor, espabilándome solo, diez soberanos fueron, apagando el fuego del molino de Torry, y ha ido creciendo y creciendo poco a poco, hasta que he reunido treinta libras, *amás* de poner cómoda a mi madre. Podría tener

más, pero soy demasiado blando con las mujeres y no puedo evitar venderles verdaderas gangas. Por ejemplo, aquí tengo este fardo —dijo, golpeándolo con energía—. Cualquier otro ganaría un buen dinero, pero yo… Pardiez, si casi lo vendo por lo mismo que *m'*ha *costao*.

—¿Lleva usted tela de visillos? —preguntó la señora Glegg con tono condescendiente, acercándose desde la mesilla de té y doblando la servilleta.

—Eh, señora, que no llevo nada que a *usté* le valga la pena ver. No se me ocurriría enseñárselo, sería un insulto.

—Pero deje que lo vea —insistió la señora Glegg, sin abandonar el aire de superioridad—. Si son piezas taradas, tal vez sean de la mejor calidad.

—No, señora. Yo sé qué lugar me corresponde —dijo Bob, levantando el saco y echándoselo al hombro—. No quiero mostrar mi mercancía barata a una dama como *usté*. La venta ambulante ya no es lo que era: se escandalizaría al ver la diferencia. Señor, estoy a sus órdenes: cuando quiera nos vamos a ver a Salt.

—Todo a su debido tiempo —dijo el señor Glegg, sin ningunas ganas de cortar la conversación—. ¿Te necesitan en el muelle, Tom?

—No, señor. He dejado a Stowe en mi lugar.

—Vamos, entonces deje el fardo y muéstreme lo que lleva —dijo la señora Glegg mientras arrastraba una silla hasta la ventana y se sentaba con gran dignidad.

—No me lo pida, señora —le rogó Bob.

—No se hable más —ordenó la señora Glegg con severidad— y haga lo que le digo.

—Señora, no deseo hacerlo, pero se hará lo que *usté* ordene —dijo Bob lentamente, depositando el fardo en la puerta y empezando a desatarlo con dedos remisos. Sin dejar de farfullar en las pausas entre una frase y otra, añadió—: No va a comprarme nada… sentiría que lo hiciera… Piense en las mujeres de los pueblos de por aquí, que nunca han ido a más de cien yardas de su casa… sería una pena que *usté* les comprara sus gangas. Pardiez, si cuando me ven organizan una fiesta… Y nunca volveré a conseguirles gangas como éstas. Ahora no tengo tiempo, porque tengo que irme a Laceham. Mire esto —añadió Bob, recobrando su rapidez habitual y

sosteniendo un pañuelo de lana escarlata con una corona bordada en la esquina—: aquí tiene algo con lo que a una muchacha se le haría la boca y sólo por dos chelines. ¿Por qué? Porque tiene un agujerito de polilla en esta esquina sin bordar. Pardiez, me parece que la Providencia envió las polillas y el moho a propósito *pa* rebajar un poco los tejidos *pa* las mujeres hermosas que no tienen mucho dinero. Si no hubiera sido por eso, todos los pañuelos serían de las damas ricas y hermosas como *usté*, señora, a cinco chelines la pieza, ni un cuarto de penique menos. Pero ¿qué hace la polilla? ¡A ver! Se zampa tres chelines en un santiamén, y así los vendedores ambulantes como yo podemos llevar un poquito de fuego a las muchachas pobres que viven en casas oscuras. ¡Pardiez, si cuando mira uno este pañuelo tiene la sensación de que es una hoguera!

Bob lo sostuvo a distancia para admirarlo bien:

—Sí, pero en esta época del año nadie quiere fuego —espetó la señora Glegg—. Deje a un lado las cosas de color y déjeme ver las telas de visillo, si tiene.

—Señora, ya le dije lo que iba a suceder —dijo Bob, arrojando a un lado las telas de colores con aire de desesperación—. Ya sabía yo que se enojaría por tener que ver estos artículos miserables que yo llevo. Aquí tiene un retal de muselina estampada pero *¿pa* qué va a perder el tiempo mirándola? Es como si se dedicara a mirar lo que comen los pobres: sólo conseguiría perder el apetito. En mitad de la pieza, hay una yarda que ha quedado sin dibujo. Pardiez, si esta muselina es digna de la princesa Victoria —dijo Bob, arrojándola hacia el césped, como si quisiera apartarla de los ojos de la señora Glegg—, pero la comprará la mujer del buhonero de Fibb's End, allí irá a parar. Diez chelines por todo, diez yardas, contando la estropeada: habría costado veinticinco chelines, ni un penique menos. Pero no diré nada más, señora; eso no es nada *pa usté*. *Usté* puede pagar tres veces más por algo que no sea ni la mitad de bueno. Y de los visillos de que hablaba *usté*… bien, tengo una pieza de risa…

—Traiga esa muselina —dijo la señora Glegg—. Es de color crema y tengo debilidad por ese color.

—Señora, que es una pieza tarada —insistió Bob con tono de desprecio —. ¡No hará nada con ella, señora! Se la dará a la cocinera, ya lo sé, y sería

una pena porque parecerá una señora: no es adecuada *pa* una criada.

—Cójala y mídala —ordenó la señora Glegg.

Bob obedeció a regañadientes.

—¡Mire lo que sobra! —dijo, mostrando media yarda, mientras la señora Glegg examinaba el trozo estropeado y echaba la cabeza hacia atrás para juzgar si se veía la tara de lejos.

—Le doy seis chelines por ella —soltó la señora Glegg con aire de quien da un ultimátum.

—Señora, si ya le dije que le ofendería mirar mi fardo. Ese trozo estropeado le ha revuelto el estómago, me doy cuenta —dijo Bob, recogiendo la muselina a toda velocidad con intención aparente de recoger la carga—. Cuando *usté* vivía en la casa de piedra, estaba *usté* acostumbrada a que los buhoneros le trajeran otro tipo de artículos. La venta ambulante ya no es lo que era, ya se lo he dicho: lo que yo llevo es *pa* gente vulgar. La señora Pepper me dará diez chelines por esa muselina y será una pena que no le pida más. Estos artículos se amortizan: conservan el color hasta que se deshacen los hilos en la tina de lavar, cosa que no sucederá mientras yo sea joven.

—Bien, pues siete chelines —dijo la señora Glegg.

—Quíteselo de la cabeza, señora —dijo Bob—. Aquí tiene un trozo de visillo*, pa* que lo mire mientras recojo el fardo. *Pa* que vea en qué se ha convertido este oficio. Con topos y ramitas, ya ve; bonito, pero amarillento: se ha quedado arrinconado y ha cogido ese color. Nunca habría podido comprar un visillo de esta calidad si no hubiera estado de este color. Pardiez, me ha costado mucho aprender el valor de estos artículos; cuando empecé a llevar el fardo era ignorante como un cerdo: no distinguía entre el visillo y el calicó. Creía que las telas, cuanto más gruesas, más valían. Me asusté, porque soy un tipo simple, incapaz de artimañas, señora. No veo mucho más allá de mi nariz y si voy más lejos, temo equivocarme. Y di cinco chelines con ocho peniques por este retal *pa* visillos, y si le dijera otra cosa, estaría contándole mentiras: y cinco chelines con ocho peniques pediré por él, ni un penique más, porque es un artículo *pa* mujer y a mí me gusta complacerlas. Cinco con ocho por seis yardas: es tan barato como si se pagara sólo el polvo que cubre la tela.

—No me importaría quedarme tres yardas —dijo la señora Glegg.

—Caramba, si hay seis en total —dijo Bob—. No, señora, no le merece la pena: mañana mismo puede ir a la tienda y comprar el mismo dibujo blanqueado. Sólo le costará tres veces más, pero ¿qué es eso *pa* una señora como *usté*? —añadió Bob, atando el fardo con énfasis.

—Vamos, deme esa muselina —ordenó la señora Glegg—. Tenga ocho chelines por ella.

—Estará de broma, señora —dijo Bob, mirándola con aire divertido—. En cuanto la vi en la ventana, me di cuenta de que usté es una dama muy bromista.

—Bien, apártemela —ordenó la señora Glegg.

—Pero si se la dejo por diez chelines, señora, espero que tenga la *bondá* de no decírselo a nadie. Me convertiría en el hazmerreír de mi gremio, se burlarían de mí si lo supieran. Tengo que hacer creer que pido más por mi mercancía, si no se darán cuenta de que soy tonto. Le agradezco que no insista en comprar el visillo, porque entonces habría perdido mis dos mejores gangas y pensaba ofrecérselas a la señora Pepper de Fibb's End, que es una buena clienta.

—Déjeme ver otra vez el visillo —dijo la señora Glegg, encaprichada con los topos y las ramitas, ahora que los perdía de vista.

—Bien, no puedo negarme, señora —dijo Bob, tendiéndoselo—. ¡Qué dibujo! Auténticas *manufaturas* de Laceham. Ésta es la clase de telas que recomiendo que envíe el señor Tom. Pardiez, es un buen artículo *pa* cualquiera que tenga un poco de dinero. Estas telas de Laceham harán que el dinero críe como conejos. ¡Si yo fuera una señora con un poco de dinero! Vaya, conocí una que puso treinta libras en este negocio, una señora con una pierna de madera, pero tan lista que no había quien la pillara: antes de empezar cualquier cosa, ya sabía por dónde tenía que ir. Pues bien, prestó treinta libras a un joven dedicado a la pañería y él las invirtió en tejidos de Laceham; un oficial encargado de la carga que es amigo mío, aunque no es Salt, se las llevó, y consiguió el ocho por ciento a la primera, y ahora estará enviando mercancías en todos los barcos, hasta que se haga tan rica como un judío. Bucks se llama, no vive en esta ciudad. Ahora, señora, si hiciera el favor de darme ese retal de visillo…

—Quince chelines por los dos —propuso la señora Glegg—, pero es un precio vergonzoso.

—Quia, señora. No lo dirá cuando lleve cinco años arrodillándose en la iglesia. Le estoy haciendo un regalo, de veras. Esos ocho peniques me recortan los beneficios como una navaja. Ahora, señor —prosiguió Bob, echándose el fardo al hombro—, si hace *usté* el favor, quisiera ir a encargarme de ayudar al señor Tom a hacerse rico. Ah, me gustaría que tuviera otras veinte libras *pa* prestármelas a mí: las emplearía más deprisa de lo que se tarda en decir el catecismo.

—Aguarda un momento, Glegg —dijo la dama cuando su esposo cogía el sombrero—. Nunca quieres darme oportunidad de hablar. Vete ahora y ocúpate de este negocio, y al regresar dime si todavía estoy a tiempo de hablar. ¡Como si no fuera tía de mi propio sobrino y cabeza de su familia materna! Como si no tuviera unas buenas guineas apartadas para él, así sabrá a quién debe respetar cuando yo esté en el ataúd.

—Vamos, señora Glegg, di lo que quieras decir de una vez —la apremió el señor Glegg.

—Bien, deseo que no se haga nada sin que yo lo sepa. No digo que no vaya a arriesgar veinte libras, si averiguas que todo es correcto y seguro. Y, si lo hago, Tom —concluyó la señora Glegg, volviéndose hacia su sobrino con aire imponente—, espero que recuerdes siempre y guardes agradecimiento a esta tía. Ya sabes que te pediré un interés, porque no soy partidaria de dar cosas: en mi familia nunca hemos esperado regalos.

—Gracias, tía —contestó Tom con orgullo—. Yo también prefiero que se trate de un préstamo.

—Muy bien, ése es el espíritu de los Dodson —sentenció la señora Glegg, levantándose para recoger su labor con la sensación de que cualquier cosa que se añadiera a esta frase lapidaria supondría un súbito descenso de lo sublime a lo vulgar.

Tras descubrir a Salt —ese individuo tan *salao*— envuelto en una nube de humo de tabaco en *The Anchor Tavern*, el señor Glegg inició una investigación que resultó lo bastante satisfactoria como para garantizar el adelanto del «cúmquibu», al que la tía Glegg contribuyó con veinte libras; y en este modesto principio puedes ver, lector, el origen de un hecho que, de

otro modo, te habría sorprendido. Sin que su padre lo supiera, Tom empezó a acumular unos ahorros que prometían, a no muy largo plazo, superar la cantidad guardada y saldar las deudas. En cuanto empezó a dedicarse a esta fuente de beneficios, Tom decidió sacarle el mayor partido posible y no perdió oportunidad de obtener información y ampliar sus pequeños negocios. No se lo dijo a su padre, influido por esa extraña mezcla de sentimientos opuestos que con frecuencia da razón por igual a quienes censuran un comportamiento y a quienes lo admiran: por un lado, se debía a ese rechazo a las confidencias que se da entre familiares próximos —un rechazo hacia la familia que estropea la relación más sagrada de nuestra vida—; y, por otro, lo empujaba el deseo de sorprender a su padre con una gran alegría. No se le ocurrió pensar que habría sido mejor aliviar el intervalo con una esperanza y evitar el delirio de una alegría repentina.

Cuando Maggie se encontró con Philip por primera vez, Tom poseía ya un capital de casi ciento cincuenta libras y, mientras caminaban a la luz del atardecer por las Fosas Rojas, bajo la misma luz del ocaso, Tom cabalgaba hacia Laceham, orgulloso de emprender el primer viaje en nombre de Guest & Co., dando vueltas a las oportunidades que, a finales del año siguiente, le permitirían duplicar los beneficios, borrar del nombre de su padre el oprobio de las deudas y tal vez —porque ya tendría veintiún años— empezar de nuevo en otro empleo más digno. ¿Acaso no lo merecía? Estaba convencido de que así era.

Capítulo III

La balanza inestable

Tal como he dicho, tras pasar la tarde en las Fosas, Rojas Maggie se marchó a su casa sumida ya en un conflicto. Habrás visto con claridad en su encuentro con Philip, lector, de qué conflicto se trataba. De repente, encontraba una abertura en la pared de piedra que cerraba el estrecho Valle de la Humillación; donde no tenía otro panorama que un cielo remoto e insondable; y algunos de los placeres terrenales que le rondaban por la memoria ya no le parecían fuera de su alcance. Podría tener libros, conversación, afecto; podría oír noticias del mundo, del que no había perdido la sensación de exilio; y, al mismo tiempo, sería un gesto amable hacia Philip, el cual era digno de lástima porque, sin duda, no era feliz. Y quizá aquélla fuera una oportunidad para hacer que su mente fuera más digna del más alto servicio; quizá la devoción más noble y completa apenas podía existir sin cierta amplitud de conocimientos. ¿Acaso debería vivir siempre en aquel resignado encarcelamiento? Era algo tan bueno, tan irreprochable que hubiera una amistad entre ella y Philip; los motivos que lo prohibían eran tan poco razonables, ¡tan poco cristianos! Pero la advertencia severa y monótona se repetía una y otra vez: estaba perdiendo la simplicidad y la claridad de su vida al pensar en ocultar algo, y al abandonar la simple regla de la renuncia se ponía bajo la seductora guía de deseos ilimitables. A la semana siguiente, cuando regresó por la tarde a las Fosas Rojas, creía haber reunido ya fuerza suficiente para obedecer a aquella advertencia. Pero si bien estaba decidida a despedirse

afectuosamente de Philip, ¡cuánto ansiaba que llegara el paseo vespertino en la tranquila y moteada sombra de las hondonadas!, lejos de todo lo desagradable y feo; la mirada de afectuosa admiración que la recibiría; la sensación de camaradería que los recuerdos de la infancia daban a una conversación más sabia y adulta; la seguridad de que Philip escucharía con un interés único todo lo que ella dijera. Sería muy duro dar la espalda a aquella media hora con la sensación de que no volvería a repetirse. No obstante, dijo todo lo que quería con aire firme y serio.

—Philip, he tomado una decisión. Tenemos que renunciar el uno al otro en todo, excepto en nuestros recuerdos. No puedo verte si no es a escondidas. Espera, ya sé lo que vas a decir: son los sentimientos erróneos de otras personas lo que nos obliga a ocultarnos; pero la ocultación es mala, sea cual sea la causa: tengo la sensación de que sería perjudicial para ti, para ambos. Y, además, si se descubriese nuestro secreto habría penas y enfados, y también tendríamos que separarnos. Y entonces, ya acostumbrados a tratarnos, sería más difícil.

El rostro de Philip se sonrojó y, por un momento, pareció que estuviera dispuesto a resistirse a esa decisión con todas sus fuerzas. Sin embargo, se controló.

—Bien, Maggie —dijo con simulada calma—. Si tenemos que separarnos, intentemos olvidarlo durante media hora y hablemos un ratito por última vez.

Le tomó la mano y Maggie no vio motivo alguno para retirarla: el silencio de Philip le confirmaba que le había infligido un gran dolor y quería mostrarle que no había sido por voluntad propia. Caminaron en silencio, cogidos de la mano.

—Sentémonos en esa hondonada —propuso Philip—, allí donde nos detuvimos la última vez. Mira cómo se han desparramado las rosas silvestres y han llenado el suelo de pétalos.

Se sentaron al pie del fresno inclinado.

—He empezado ya tu retrato entre los pinos, Maggie —dijo Philip—. Así pues, deja que estudie un poco tu rostro mientras estás quieta, puesto que no voy a volver a verlo. Por favor, ladea un poco la cabeza —dijo con un tono suplicante al que difícilmente podría haberse negado Maggie. El

rostro pleno y resplandeciente, con la corona negra y brillante, parecía el de una diosa satisfecha de la adoración del joven pálido de rasgos menudos que la miraba.

—Así pues, voy a posar para el segundo retrato —dijo Maggie con una sonrisa—. ¿Será mayor que el otro?

—Sí, mucho mayor. Éste será un óleo. Parecerás una hamadríade alta, morena, fuerte y noble, salida de uno de los pinos cuando las ramas proyecten las sombras crepusculares sobre la hierba.

—Se diría que lo que más te gusta es pintar, ¿no es así, Philip?

—Quizá sí —contestó Philip con cierta tristeza—, pero pienso en demasiadas cosas: siembro todo tipo de semillas y no consigo gran cosecha de ninguna de ellas. Tengo la desgracia de estar interesado por muchas cosas diversas y de no tener gran talento para ninguna en concreto. Me gustan la pintura y la música, la literatura clásica, medieval y moderna: revoloteo por todas partes y no me quedo en ningún sitio.

—Pero, sin duda, es una suerte sentir tantas inclinaciones y disfrutar de tantas cosas hermosas cuando están a tu alcance —meditó Maggie—. Siempre me ha parecido una especie de estúpida habilidad la de tener una sola clase de talento, es ser algo así como una paloma mensajera.

—Si yo fuera como cualquier otro hombre, podría ser una fuente de felicidad tener muchas aficiones —dijo Philip con amargura—. Me bastaría la mediocridad para conseguir cierto poder y distinción, como hacen los demás. Por lo menos, podría obtener esas tibias satisfacciones que permiten a los hombres pasarse sin las más grandes. Entonces, quizá me pareciera agradable la sociedad de Saint Ogg's. En cambio, sólo alguna facultad que me elevara por encima del nivel de esta vida provinciana me compensaría el dolor que siento. Bueno, con una excepción: una pasión amorosa.

Maggie no oyó esta última frase porque luchaba contra la conciencia de que las palabras de Philip habían hecho vibrar de nuevo su propio descontento.

—Entiendo lo que quieres decir, aunque no sé tantas cosas como tú —dijo Maggie—. Antes pensaba que no podría soportar la vida si cada día fuera siempre igual al anterior y me viera obligada a hacer cosas sin importancia alguna y a no conocer nunca nada más grande. Pero, querido

Philip, creo que somos como niños a los que cuida alguien más sabio que nosotros. ¿Acaso no es justo que nos resignemos por completo, por muchas cosas que se nos nieguen? Durante los últimos dos o tres años esta idea me ha proporcionado mucha paz; se encuentra alegría en el sometimiento de la voluntad.

—Sí, Maggie —dijo Philip con vehemencia—, y te estás encerrando en un fanatismo estrecho con el que te engañas, y es sólo un modo de huir del dolor sofocando lo más poderoso de tu carácter. La alegría y la paz no son resignación: resignación es soportar voluntariamente un dolor sin paliativos, un dolor que uno no espera mitigar. El estupor no es resignación, y mantenerse en la ignorancia equivale a vivir en un estado de estupor, a cerrar todos los caminos por los que puedes conocer la vida de tus iguales. Yo no me he resignado: no estoy seguro de que la vida sea lo bastante larga para aprender esta lección. Y, en realidad, tú tampoco te has resignado: sólo intentas aturdirte.

Los labios de Maggie temblaban: advertía que a Philip no le faltaba razón pero, en el fondo de su conciencia, sabía que la aplicación inmediata de estas ideas a su conducta equivaldría poco menos que a la falsedad. La doble sensación de Maggie correspondía al doble impulso de su interlocutor: Philip estaba convencido de sus palabras, pero las pronunciaba con vehemencia para argumentar contra una decisión que se oponía a sus deseos. Pero el rostro de Maggie, infantilizado por las lágrimas que le llenaban los ojos, lo conmovió y provocó en él un sentimiento menos egoísta y más tierno.

—No pensemos en eso en esta corta media hora —dijo Philip suavemente tras tomarle da mano—. Limitémonos a pensar en que estamos juntos… seremos amigos a pesar de esta separación… siempre pensaremos el uno en el otro. Mientras vivas, me alegraré de estar vivo, porque pensaré en que siempre podrá llegar el momento en que pueda… en que me dejes ayudarte de un modo u otro.

—Qué hermano tan bueno y querido habrías sido, Philip —dijo Maggie, sonriendo a través de da bruma de las lágrimas—. Creo que me habrías mimado tanto y habrías estado tan contento de que te quisiera que hasta yo me habría sentido satisfecha. Me habrías querido tanto como para

soportarme y perdonármelo todo. Eso es lo que siempre deseé que hiciera Tom. Nunca me he contentado con un poco de una cosa, por eso es mejor para mí prescindir por completo de la felicidad terrenal… Nunca he tenido la sensación de tener suficiente música: quería que tocaran más instrumentos, quería voces más plenas y profundas. ¿Todavía cantas, Philip? —añadió bruscamente, como si hubiera perdido el hilo de da conversación.

—Sí —contestó—, casi cada día. Pero tengo una voz mediocre, como todo lo demás.

—Oh, por favor, cántame algo, sólo una canción. Para que pueda oírla antes de irme… una de las canciones que cantabas en Lorton los sábados por la tarde, cuando teníamos todo el salón para nosotros y me tapaba la cabeza con el delantal para escuchar.

—Sí, ya lo sé —dijo Philip, y Maggie enterró la cara en las manos mientras él cantaba *sotto voce* «El amor juguetea en sus ojo».[26] y añadía —: Era ésa, ¿no?

—Oh, no. No quiero quedarme para oírla —dijo Maggie, poniéndose en pie—. Después no podría quitármela de la cabeza. Caminemos un poco, Philip. Tengo que irme a casa.

Maggie se alejó y Philip se vio obligado a ponerse en pie y seguirla.

—Maggie —dijo en tono de reproche—. No persistas en esta privación voluntaria y sin sentido. Me destroza ver cómo embotas y aturdes tu carácter de este modo. Estabas tan llena de vida cuando eras pequeña… pensaba que serías una mujer brillante, toda ingenio, con una imaginación genial. Y todavía se advierten, de vez en cuando, destellos en tu rostro, hasta que echas por encima este velo de pasividad.

—¿Por qué me dices cosas tan amargas, Philip? —preguntó Maggie.

—Porque preveo que esto no va a terminar bien; no podrás seguir adelante con esta tortura.

—Espero que se me conceda fuerza suficiente —dijo Maggie temblorosa.

—No, Maggie: nadie recibe fuerzas para hacer algo antinatural. Es pura cobardía buscar la seguridad en las negaciones. Ningún carácter se hace fuerte de este modo. Algún día te verás lanzada al mundo y entonces todas

las satisfacciones racionales de tu naturaleza que ahora te niegas te asaltarán como un deseo salvaje.

Maggie se sobresaltó y se detuvo, mirando a Philip con expresión de alarma.

—Philip, ¿cómo te atreves a agitarme de este modo? Estás tentándome.

—No, no te tiento; pero el amor nos hace más perspicaces, Maggie, y la perspicacia muchas veces ayuda a augurar el rumbo de las cosas. Haz el favor de escucharme, permite que te dé libros. Deja que te vea de vez en cuando, que sea tu hermano y profesor, como dijiste en Lorton. Es preferible que me veas a que cometas este largo suicidio.

Maggie se sintió incapaz de hablar. Negó con la cabeza y caminó en silencio hasta que llegaron al final de los pinos albares y extendió la mano en un gesto de despedida.

—Entonces, Maggie, ¿me destierras de este lugar para siempre? Imagino que podré venir a caminar algunas veces y, si entonces nos encontramos por casualidad, no estaremos ocultando nada, ¿verdad?

Es precisamente cuando nuestra decisión parece a punto de ser irrevocable —cuando las puertas de hierro fatales están a punto de cerrarse sobre nosotros— el momento en que se pone a prueba nuestra fuerza. Entonces, tras horas de claros razonamientos y firmes convicciones, nos aferramos a cualquier sofisma que anule nuestras largas luchas y nos traiga una derrota que deseamos más que la victoria.

El corazón de Maggie dio un brinco ante el subterfugio de Philip y en su rostro se reflejó el pequeño sobresalto que acompaña a la sensación de alivio. Philip lo advirtió y se separaron en silencio.

Philip percibía la situación con excesiva exactitud para que no lo asaltara el temor de haber intervenido con demasiada impertinencia en la conciencia de Maggie, tal vez con un fin egoísta. ¡Pero no! Sus objetivos no eran egoístas. Tenía pocas esperanzas de que Maggie lo correspondiera alguna vez; y sería mejor para la vida futura de Maggie, cuando hubieran desaparecido los mezquinos obstáculos familiares que le impedían ser libre, que no hubiera sacrificado totalmente el presente y que hubiera tenido alguna oportunidad de adquirir cultura, de intercambiar impresiones con una inteligencia situada por encima del nivel vulgar de las personas con las

que ahora estaba condenada a vivir. Si analizamos las consecuencias de nuestras acciones a un plazo lo bastante largo, siempre podemos encontrar algún punto en la combinación de resultados en que estos actos puedan estar justificados: al adoptar el punto de vista de una Providencia que dispone los resultados o de un filósofo que los rastrea, podemos encontrar una excusa perfecta para optar por hacer lo que nos resulta más agradable en el momento. Y así justificaba Philip sus sutiles esfuerzos por vencer los sinceros impulsos de Maggie contra una ocultación que introduciría doblez en su espíritu y podría provocar nuevas penas a quienes tenían mayores derechos naturales sobre ella. Sin embargo, un exceso de pasión en Philip hacía que no prestara mucha atención a las justificaciones. Su deseo de ver a Maggie y formar parte de la vida de ésta contenía algo de ese impulso salvaje por apoderarse de la felicidad que surge de una vida en la que la constitución mental y física han hecho que predomine el dolor. Philip estaba al margen de los bienes que compartían otros hombres: ni siquiera podía formar parte de los insignificantes y sólo se lo distinguía como objeto de piedad, alejado de lo que era natural para los demás. Incluso para Maggie él era una excepción: resultaba evidente que ni siquiera se le había ocurrido que pudiera ser su enamorado.

Lector, no juzgues a Philip con severidad: las personas feas y deformes tienen gran necesidad de virtudes excepcionales porque sin ellas es probable que se sientan muy incómodas: pero quizá vaya demasiado lejos la teoría de que, como consecuencia de las desventajas personales, surgen virtudes inusuales, de la misma manera que los animales de climas más severos poseen pelo más denso. Se ha hablado demasiado de las tentaciones de la belleza, pero creo que son parejas a las de la fealdad, puesto que la tentación de excederse en un festín donde se ofrecen variadas delicias para los ojos, oídos y paladar depende en gran medida de la tentación que asalta a la desesperación del hambre. ¿Acaso la Torre del Hambre[27] no es la prueba máxima a la que puede someterse lo que hay de humano en nosotros?

Philip nunca había conocido el alivio del amor materno, que nos llega en abundancia porque nuestra necesidad es grande; que se aferra a nosotros tanto más tiernamente cuanto más débiles somos; y, además, la percepción

de los defectos de su padre amortiguaba la conciencia de su afecto e indulgencia. Alejado de la vida real y con una sensibilidad casi femenina, poseía cierta repulsión intolerante propia de las mujeres hacia lo mundano y la búsqueda de los placeres sensuales. El único lazo natural poderoso de su vida —su relación como hijo— le resultaba extremadamente doloroso. Tal vez sea inevitable que haya algo malsano en un ser humano que queda relegado de la vida normal hasta que la capacidad de lucha ha tenido tiempo de triunfar, y pocas veces lo ha tenido a la edad de veintidós años. Aquella fuerza era muy poderosa en Philip, pero el mismo sol parece débil a través de la neblina de la mañana.

Capítulo IV

Otra escena de amor

A principios del siguiente mes de abril, casi un año después de la dudosa despedida que acabas de presenciar, lector, puedes, si así lo deseas, ver de nuevo a Maggie entrar en las Fosas Rojas a través del bosquecillo de pinos albares. Mas, en esta ocasión, es a primera hora de la tarde y no a última, y el filo cortante de la brisa primaveral hace que Maggie se arrebuje en el gran chal y avance rápidamente; aunque mira a su alrededor, como siempre, para contemplar a sus anchas sus amados árboles. Su mirada es más inquisitiva que en junio pasado y una sonrisa vaga por sus labios, como si algún comentario jovial aguardara al oyente adecuado; éste no tarda en aparecer.

—Toma tu *Corinne*[28] —dijo Maggie, sacando el libro de debajo del chal—. Tenías razón al decirme que no me haría ningún bien. Pero te equivocabas al pensar que desearía ser como ella.

—Entonces, ¿de veras no te gustaría ser la décima musa, Maggie? —preguntó Philip, mirándole la cara como contemplaríamos nosotros el primer resquicio entre las nubes que promete otra vez un cielo despejado.

—En absoluto —contestó Maggie riendo—. Las musas eran diosas que vivían muy incómodas, siempre cargando con instrumentos musicales o rollos de pergaminos. Si llevara un arpa en este clima, debería taparla con un tapete verde y seguro que me la olvidaba por todas partes.

—Así pues, ¿coincides conmigo y no te gusta el personaje de Corinne?

—No he terminado el libro —contestó Maggie—. En cuanto llegué a la parte de la joven dama rubia que leía en el parque, lo cerré y decidí no seguir leyendo. Preveo que la joven de tez clara arrebatará a Corinne todos sus amores y hará que sea desgraciada. He decidido no leer más libros en los que las rubias arramblen con toda la felicidad. Empiezo a tenerles manía. Si me das una historia en que la morena triunfe, la situación se equilibrará un poco. Quiero vengar a Rebecca, a Flora Mac-Ivor y a Minna[29], y a todas las demás morenas desgraciadas. Puesto que eres mi tutor, deberías evitar que me formara esos prejuicios contra los que tú tanto clamas.

—Bien, quizá vengues a las morenas tú misma: quítale todo el amor a tu prima Lucy. Seguro que tiene a sus pies a algún apuesto joven de Saint Ogg's. Sólo debes mostrarte radiante y tu rubia prima quedará sofocada por tus rayos.

—Philip, cómo se te ocurre mezclar mis tonterías con la vida real —exclamó Maggie con aspecto ofendido—. Como si yo, con mis viejos vestidos y mis carencias, pudiera ser rival de mi pequeña y querida Lucy, que sabe hacer todo tipo de cosas encantadoras y es diez veces más bonita que yo, suponiendo que yo fuera lo bastante odiosa y vil como para desear ser su rival. Además, nunca voy a casa de tía Deane cuando hay invitados: pero mi querida Lucy es buena y me quiere, por eso algunas veces viene a verme y desea que yo vaya a verla de vez en cuando.

—Maggie —dijo Philip con tono de sorpresa—, no es propio de ti tomar las bromas al pie de la letra. Habrás estado esta mañana en Saint Ogg's y se te habrá contagiado un poco de estupidez.

—Bien —contestó Maggie con una sonrisa—; si se trata de una broma, la verdad es que era bastante mala. Pero me ha parecido que tenías razón al reprobarme, he creído que querías recordarme que soy presumida y deseo que todo el mundo me admire. Pero no defiendo a las morenas porque yo lo sea, sino porque siempre me preocupo por los que son desgraciados. Si abandonaran a las rubias, me gustarían más ellas. En las historias de amor siempre me pongo de parte del abandonado.

—Entonces, nunca tendrás valor para rechazar a nadie, ¿no es así, Maggie? —preguntó Philip, sonrojándose un poco.

—No lo sé —contestó Maggie vacilando. Y con una amplia sonrisa, añadió—: Me parece que si el pretendiente fuera muy engreído no me costaría rechazarlo. Y después, si se sintiera muy humillado, me ablandaría.

—Me he preguntado alguna vez si no sería más probable que tú llega a amar a un hombre al que otras mujeres tal vez no amarían nunca.

—Eso dependería de cuál fuera el motivo por el que lo rechazaran —contestó Maggie riendo—. Podría ser muy desagradable. Quizá me mirara a través de un monóculo que sujetara con el ojo con una horrible mueca, como el joven Torry. Supongo que a otras mujeres tampoco les gusta, pero nunca he sentido ninguna pena por él. No me dan pena los engreídos, porque creo que se bastan a sí mismos para consolarse.

—Pero imagina, Maggie… imagina que no fuera un hombre presumido, que creyera que no tenía nada de que presumir… que hubiera estado marcado desde la infancia por algún tipo de sufrimiento y para quien tú fueras la luz de su vida… que te quisiera, te adorara tanto que se sintiera feliz con verte de vez en cuando…

Philip se interrumpió, presa de un súbito temor a que su confesión pusiera fin a aquella felicidad, una punzada del mismo temor que le había obligado a mantener su amor en secreto durante largos meses. Una oleada de timidez le decía que había sido un atolondrado al hablar, puesto que la actitud de Maggie, aquella mañana, era tan espontánea e indiferente como de costumbre.

Mas en aquel momento ya no parecía indiferente. Sorprendida por el inusual tono emocionado de Philip, se había dado la vuelta rápidamente para mirarlo y, a medida que él hablaba, su rostro había experimentado un gran cambio: se había sonrojado y sobresaltado, tal como sucede a las personas que oyen una noticia que les hace alterar sus ideas sobre el pasado. Permaneció en silencio y, tras caminar hacia el tronco de un árbol caído, se sentó como si no le quedara fuerza para los músculos. Temblaba.

—Maggie —dijo Philip, alarmándose cada vez más a medida que transcurría el silencio—. He sido un tonto al decir esto, olvídalo. Me conformaré con que las cosas sigan como antes. —Habló con tanta angustia que Maggie se sintió obligada a decir algo.

—Philip, estoy tan sorprendida… Ni me había pasado por la cabeza. —El esfuerzo por hablar hizo que se le saltaran las lágrimas.

—¿Me odiarás por culpa de lo que he dicho? —preguntó Philip impetuosamente—. ¿Crees que soy un vanidoso estúpido?

—¡Oh, Philip! ¿Cómo puede ocurrírsete que piense eso? Como si yo no agradeciera cualquier clase de amor… Pero… pero nunca se me había ocurrido que pudieras ser mi enamorado. Todo eso me parecía tan lejano… como un sueño, como una de esas historias que uno imagina… No creía que nunca nadie se enamorara de mí.

—Entonces, ¿puedes soportar la idea de pensar en mí como tu enamorado, Maggie? —preguntó Philip, sentándose a su lado y tomándole la mano, arrastrado por una repentina esperanza—. ¿Me quieres?

Maggie palideció. Aquella pregunta directa no parecía tener fácil respuesta. Pero sus ojos se encontraron con los de Philip, que en aquel momento brillaban hermosos, implorando amor.

—Creo —contestó Maggie vacilando, con sencilla ternura infantil—, creo que no podría querer a nadie como a ti. —Hizo una pequeña pausa y añadió—: Pero me parece que será mejor para nosotros que no digamos nada más, ¿verdad, querido Philip? Sabes que, si se supiera, ni siquiera podríamos ser amigos. Nunca estuve segura de que hiciera bien al verte, aunque nuestros encuentros han sido para mí preciosos en distintos aspectos, y ahora vuelvo a temer que todo esto nos conduzca al desastre.

—Pero no ha sucedido nada malo, Maggie, y si te hubieras dejado llevar por tu temor, sólo habrías pasado otro año monótono y embotado en lugar de revivir y de ser de nuevo tal como eres.

Maggie negó con la cabeza.

—Sé que todo esto ha sido muy agradable: las conversaciones, los libros y la sensación de esperar el paseo con ganas para contarte todo lo que me había pasado por la cabeza mientras estaba lejos de ti. Pero me ha inquietado, me ha hecho pensar mucho en el mundo; y vuelvo a tener pensamientos impacientes, me canso de mi casa. Y después me duele muchísimo haber sentido cansancio de mi padre y de mi madre. Creo que eso que tú llamas embotamiento era mejor; por lo menos, mejor para mí, porque también mis sentimientos egoístas estaban entumecidos.

Philip se había puesto en pie otra vez y caminaba de un lado a otro con impaciencia.

—No, Maggie, ya te he dicho muchas veces que tienes ideas erróneas sobre lo que es el control de los sentimientos. Lo que tú llamas control de ti misma no es más que un empeño en ser ciega y sorda a todo excepto a una serie de impresiones; es el cultivo de una monomanía, en un carácter como el tuyo —dijo Philip con cierta irritación, pero después se sentó a su lado y le tomó la mano—. No pienses en el pasado, Maggie: piensa sólo en nuestro amor. Si puedes aferrarte a mí con todo tu corazón, terminaremos venciendo todos los obstáculos, sólo tenemos que esperar. Puedo vivir de la esperanza. Mírame, Maggie, y dime otra vez si podrías llegar a quererme. Y no apartes da vista para mirar ese árbol hendido, es un mal augurio.

Maggie volvió hacia él su mirada grande y oscura con una triste sonrisa.

—Vamos, Maggie. Dime algo amable. Eras más buena conmigo en Lorton. Allí me preguntaste si me gustaría que me besaras. ¿No te acuerdas? Y me prometiste que me darías un beso cuando volvieras a verme. No has cumplido nunca esa promesa.

Maggie sintió cierto alivio al recordar aquel episodio infantil: hacía que el presente de pareciera menos extraño. Le dio un beso tan sencillo y silencioso como cuando tenía doce años. Los ojos de Philip brillaron de deleite, pero sus palabras mostraron descontento.

—No pareces feliz, Maggie: te sientes obligada a decirme que me quieres por pura compasión.

—No, Philip —dijo Maggie, negando con la cabeza con el mismo gesto de su infancia—. Te digo la verdad. Para mí esto es nuevo y extraño; pero no creo que pueda querer a nadie más de lo que te quiero a ti. Me gustaría vivir siempre contigo, hacerte feliz. Pero hay una sola cosa que no haría por ti: herir a mi padre. No debes pedírmelo nunca.

—No, Maggie, no te pediré nada, lo soportaré todo. Esperaré un año entero otro beso, si dejas que ocupe el primer lugar en tu corazón.

—No —dijo Maggie con una sonrisa—, no te haré esperar tanto. —Pero de nuevo con semblante serio, se puso en pie y añadió—: Pero ¿qué diría tu padre, Philip? Es imposible que podamos ser nunca algo más que amigos,

hermanos en secreto, como hemos sido hasta ahora. No pensemos en otra cosa.

—No, Maggie, no puedo renunciar a ti, a menos que me engañes, a menos que sólo te intereses por mí como hermano. Dime la verdad.

—De veras te quiero, Philip. ¿Qué otra felicidad he conocido en la vida tan grande como estar contigo? Desde que era pequeña, cuando Tom era bueno conmigo. Y tu cerebro es para mí como un mundo, puedes contarme todo lo que quiero saber. Creo que nunca me cansaría de estar contigo. Caminaban de la mano, mirándose; en realidad, Maggie tenía prisa por marcharse, porque era ya hora. Pero la sensación de que faltaba poco para que se separaran aumentaba el temor de haber dicho algo sin querer que hubiera causado algún dolor a Philip. Aquél era uno de esos momentos peligrosos en que las palabras son a un tiempo sinceras y engañosas, cuando los sentimientos se desbordan en una crecida que deja marcas que nunca vuelven a alcanzarse.

Se detuvieron entre los pinos para separarse.

—Entonces, Maggie, ¿mi vida estará llena de esperanza, y seré más feliz que otros hombres, a pesar de todo? ¿Nos pertenecemos el uno al otro para siempre, estemos juntos o separados?

—Sí, Philip, desearía no separarme nunca de ti, desearía hacerte muy feliz.

—Espero algo más y me pregunto si algún día llegará.

Maggie sonrió con lágrimas brillantes y agachó su alta cabeza para besar aquel rostro bajo y pálido, lleno de un amor tímido e implorante, como el de una mujer.

En ese momento experimentó verdadera felicidad, convencida de que si aquel amor exigía sacrificio resultaba por ello más rico y gratificante. Dio media vuelta y se alejó hacia su casa a toda prisa con la sensación de que en la hora transcurrida desde que había pasado por aquel camino había empezado para ella una nueva época. Ahora, el tejido de los difusos sueños debía hacerse más espeso y la trama de su vida diaria real debía absorber gradualmente todas las hebras de pensamientos y emociones.

Capítulo V

El árbol hendido

Raras veces los secretos se traicionan o se descubren tal como han previsto nuestros temores. Por lo general, el miedo imagina escenas terribles y dramáticas que nos acosan a pesar de la conciencia de que son poco probables; y durante el año que Maggie había soportado la carga de estar ocultando algo, la posibilidad de que la descubrieran se le había presentado siempre en forma de súbito encuentro con su padre o Tom mientras paseaba con Philip por las Fosas Rojas. Era consciente de que no era lo más probable; pero era ésa la escena que mejor simbolizaba su íntimo temor. La realidad prefiere mecanismos basados en indicios indirectos que dependen de coincidencias aparentemente triviales y actitudes imprevisibles, pero la imaginación trabaja con otro material.

Sin duda, una de las personas más alejada de los temores de Maggie era la tía Pullet y, puesto que no vivía en Saint Ogg's y no era muy aguda de vista ni talento, éstos difícilmente se habrían fijado en ella. Y, sin embargo, la vía de la fatalidad —el trayecto del rayo— pasaba por ella. No vivía en Saint Ogg's, pero el camino de Garum Firs se encontraba junto a las Fosas Rojas, en el extremo opuesto que tomaba Maggie.

Al día siguiente del último encuentro de Maggie con Philip era domingo; el señor Pullet debía aparecer con cinta negra en el sombrero y bufanda fúnebre en la iglesia de Saint Ogg's, y la señora Pullet aprovechó la ocasión para comer con su hermana Glegg y tomar el té con la desgraciada hermana Tulliver. La tarde del domingo era la única que Tom pasaba en

casa y aquel día el buen humor que había tenido últimamente se manifestó en una charla inusualmente alegre con su padre y la invitación «¡Vamos, Maggie, ven tú también!» a la vez que salía al jardín a dar un paseo con su madre para contemplar la avanzada floración de los cerezos. Tom se sentía más satisfecho con Maggie desde que había dejado de mostrarse extraña y ascética; incluso empezaba a sentirse orgulloso de ella: había oído comentar más de una vez que su hermana era una muchacha muy hermosa. Aquel día su rostro resplandecía especialmente por una agitación oculta, debida en partes iguales al placer y al dolor, pero que podía interpretarse como señal de felicidad.

—Tienes muy buen aspecto, querida —dijo la tía Pullet moviendo la cabeza con aire triste cuando se sentaron ante la mesa del té—. Bessy, nunca pensé que tu hija llegara a ser tan guapa. Pero deberías ir de rosa, hija mía: este vestido azul que te dio la tía Glegg te da aire de flor de cuclillo. Jane nunca tuvo buen gusto, ¿por qué no te pones aquel vestido mío?

—Es tan bonito y tan elegante, tía, que me parece exagerado para mí: contrastaría demasiado con las prendas que lo acompañaran.

—A lo mejor sería poco adecuado si no supiera todo el mundo que te corresponden, pues yo puedo dártelos cuando ya no me los pongo. Es razonable que dé ropa de vez en cuando a mi sobrina, cosas que yo puedo comprar cada año y casi no desgasto. A Lucy no tengo nada que darle, porque tiene de todo y de lo más selecto: nuestra hermana Deane puede llevar la cabeza bien alta, aunque tiene una tez horriblemente amarilla, pobrecilla: creo que esa enfermedad del hígado acabará con ella. Eso es lo que ha dicho hoy el nuevo párroco, ese tal doctor Kenn, en el sermón del funeral.

—Ah, es un orador estupendo, ¿verdad, Sophy? —preguntó la señora Tulliver.

—Vaya, Lucy llevaba hoy mismo un cuello *manífico* —prosiguió la señora Pullet, con la mirada perdida y aire pensativo—. No digo yo que no tenga alguno tan bueno como el suyo, pero está a la altura del mejor de los míos.

—Según dicen, la llaman «la Beldad de Saint Ogg'». Qué palabra tan rara: será porque es verdad —observó el señor Pullet, para el cual algunas

palabras encerraban misterios impenetrables.

—¡Ca! —exclamó el señor Tulliver, celoso por Maggie—. Es muy menuda, poquita cosa. Pero vistan el palo y parecerá algo. No veo nada admirable en estas mujeres tan pequeñas: parecen *insinificantes al* lado de un hombre, desproporcionadas. Cuando escogí a mi esposa, la escogí del tamaño adecuado, ni demasiado grande ni demasiado pequeña.

La pobre esposa, con su ajada belleza, sonrió satisfecha.

—Pero no todos los hombres son altos —dijo el señor Pullet, aludiéndose a sí mismo—. Se puede ser un joven bien plantado sin medir seis pies, como el joven caballero Tom, aquí presente.

—Ah, qué más da el tamaño: lo que importa es ser normal —intervino la tía Pullet—. Por ejemplo, ahí está el hijo contrahecho del abogado Wakem. Lo he visto hoy mismo en la iglesia. ¡Santo cielo! Pensar en las propiedades que tendrá. … Y dicen que es muy murrioso, que no le gusta estar con la gente. Me pregunto si estará en su sano juicio, porque cuando venimos por el camino no hay vez que no lo encontremos abriéndose paso entre las zarzas y árboles de las Fosas Rojas.

Esta afirmación general con que la señora Pullet presentaba el hecho de haber visto a Philip en dos ocasiones en el lugar indicado produjo gran efecto en Maggie, acentuado por el hecho de que tenía a Tom delante y quiso esforzarse en parecer indiferente. Al oír el nombre de Philip había enrojecido y siguió enrojeciendo, hasta que la mención de las Fosas Rojas le hizo creer que habían desvelado su secreto y ni siquiera se atrevió a sostener la cucharilla de té, no fuera a resultar evidente su temblor. Permaneció sentada, con las manos unidas bajo la mesa, sin atreverse a levantar la vista. Afortunadamente, su padre estaba sentado al mismo lado que ella, al otro lado del tío Pullet y no podía verle la cara a menos que se inclinara hacia delante. La voz de su madre aportó cierto alivio al desviar la conversación, porque la señora Tulliver se alarmaba siempre que se mencionaba el nombre de Wakem en presencia de su esposo. Poco a poco Maggie fue recuperando suficiente compostura para alzar la vista: sus ojos se encontraron con los de Tom, pero éste los apartó de inmediato y aquella noche Maggie se acostó preguntándose si su confusión había sembrado en él alguna sospecha. Tal vez no, quizá pensara que sólo se había alarmado

porque su tía había mencionado a Wakem delante de su padre: ésa era la interpretación de su madre. Para su padre, Wakem era como una enfermedad desfiguradora: se veía obligado a soportar la conciencia de su existencia, pero le sacaba de quicio que la reconocieran los demás. Nadie podía sorprenderse de que se mostrara muy sensible a los deseos de su padre, pensaba Maggie.

Pero Tom era demasiado observador para quedar satisfecho con esa interpretación: había advertido con claridad que la excesiva confusión de Maggie ocultaba algo diferente a la inquietud por su padre. Al intentar recordar todos los detalles que podían dar forma a sus sospechas, recordó que últimamente su madre había regañado a Maggie por pasear por las Fosas Rojas cuando la tierra estaba húmeda y llegar a casa con los zapatos sucios de arcilla: sin embargo, Tom, que conservaba su vieja repulsión por la deformidad de Philip, no se atrevía a atribuir a su hermana la probabilidad de sentir algo más que un interés amistoso por aquella desgraciada excepción entre los hombres normales. Tom sentía una especie de repugnancia supersticiosa por todo lo excepcional. El amor por un hombre deforme sería algo odioso en cualquier mujer e intolerable en una hermana. Pero si Maggie había estado manteniendo cualquier tipo de relación con Philip, debía ponerle fin de inmediato; no sólo se comprometía al mantener citas secretas, sino que estaba desobedeciendo los deseos más poderosos de su padre y las órdenes expresas de su hermano. A la mañana siguiente, Tom salió de su casa en ese estado de ánimo vigilante que convierte los acontecimientos más insignificantes en coincidencias preñadas de significado.

Aquella tarde, hacia las tres y media, Tom se encontraba en el muelle hablando con Bob Jankin sobre la probabilidad de que un buen barco llamado *Adelaide* llegara en el plazo de uno o dos días con resultados muy importantes para ambos.

—¡Eh! —interrumpió Bob, mientras miraba hacia los campos situados al otro lado del río—. Ahí va Wakem, el *jorobao*. Lo reconozco, a él o a su sombra, *na* más los veo. Tropiezo mucho con él por ese lado del río.

Un pensamiento repentino pareció asaltar a Tom.

—Tengo que irme, Bob. Debo hacer una cosa —dijo, y salió a toda prisa en dirección al almacén, donde dejó recado de que alguien ocupara su puesto porque un asunto urgente lo reclamaba en su casa.

Un paso rápido y un atajo lo llevaron al instante hasta la puerta de la valla de su casa, y mientras descansaba un poco antes de abrirla, para entrar en la casa con total compostura, Maggie salió por la puerta delantera cubierta con una capota y un chal. Su suposición parecía cierta y la aguardó junto a la valla. Maggie se sobresaltó cuando lo vio.

—Tom, ¿cómo es que vienes a casa? ¿Pasa algo? —preguntó con voz trémula.

—He venido para caminar contigo hasta las Fosas Rojas y encontrarme allí con Philip Wakem —dijo Tom. La arruga que se le formaba habitualmente en el ceño se hizo más profunda.

Maggie se quedó quieta e indefensa, pálida y helada. Así pues, de un modo u otro, Tom se había enterado de todo.

—No voy —declaró finalmente, y dio media vuelta.

—Sí, claro que sí. Pero primero quiero hablar contigo. ¿Dónde está padre?

—Ha salido a caballo.

—¿Y madre?

—En el patio, con las gallinas.

—Entonces, ¿puedo entrar sin que me vea? Entraron juntos en la casa.

—Ven aquí —ordenó Tom, pasando al salón. Maggie obedeció y él cerró la puerta.

—Maggie, haz el favor de contarme ahora mismo todo lo que ha sucedido entre Philip Wakem y tú.

—¿Nuestro padre sabe algo? —preguntó Maggie, sin dejar de temblar.

—No —contestó Tom, indignado—. Pero lo sabrá si intentas engañarme de nuevo.

—No deseo engañar a nadie —dijo Maggie, enrojeciendo de enfado al ver que aplicaba esa palabra a su conducta.

—Entonces, cuéntame toda la verdad. —Quizá ya la sabes.

—No importa que la sepa o no. Cuéntame exactamente lo que ha sucedido o nuestro padre se enterará de todo.

—Entonces, te lo contaré por él.

—Sí, ahora te conviene mostrarte muy afectuosa, pero has despreciado sus sentimientos más poderosos.

—¿Es que tú nunca te equivocas, Tom? —preguntó Maggie con aire desafiante.

—Nunca deliberadamente —contestó Tom, con orgullosa sinceridad—. Pero no tengo nada que decirte: cuéntame qué ha pasado entre Philip Wakem y tú. ¿Cuándo os visteis por primera vez en las Fosas Rojas?

—Hace un año —contestó Maggie con calma. La severidad de Tom le hacía mostrarse más desafiante y alejaba la conciencia de haber cometido un error—. No tienes que hacerme más preguntas. Hemos sido amigos un año nos hemos visto y hemos paseado con frecuencia. Y me ha prestado libros.

—¿Eso es todo? —preguntó Tom mirándola fijamente con el ceño fruncido.

Maggie hizo una pausa: entonces, decidida a poner fin al derecho de Tom a acusarla de engaño, añadió con aire altivo:

—No, no es todo. El sábado me dijo que me quería. A mí ni me había pasado por la cabeza, lo consideraba un viejo amigo.

—¿Y le diste esperanzas? —preguntó Tom con expresión de desagrado.

—Le contesté que yo también lo amaba.

Tom permaneció en silencio durante unos momentos, mirando el suelo y frunciendo el ceño, con las manos metidas en los bolsillos. Finalmente, levantó los ojos.

—Bien, Maggie —dijo fríamente—. Decide qué prefieres: o me juras solemnemente, con la mano sobre la Biblia de nuestro padre, que nunca más volverás a citarte o a hablar en privado con Philip Wakem o te niegas y yo se lo cuento todo, y este mes cuando mi esfuerzo podría hacer que se sintiera feliz otra vez, le darás un duro golpe cuando se entere de que eres una hija desobediente y mentirosa, que pone en entredicho su reputación con citas clandestinas con el hijo del hombre que ha ayudado a arruinar a su padre. ¡Elige! —exclamó Tom con fría decisión, dirigiéndose hacia la gran Biblia, tomándola y abriéndola por las guardas manuscritas.

Maggie se enfrentaba a una alternativa terrible.

—Tom —dijo, empujada a suplicar por su mismo orgullo—. No me pidas eso. Te prometo dejar de citarme con él si permites que lo vea una sola vez o le escriba y se lo explique todo, que lo dejo para no causar dolor a mi padre. Siento algo por él, no es feliz.

—No quiero oír nada sobre tus sentimientos. He dicho exactamente lo que quería decir: escoge. Y date prisa, no vaya a entrar madre.

—Si te doy mi palabra, será un juramento tan fuerte como si hubiera puesto la mano sobre la Biblia. No hace falta que lo haga.

—Haz lo que yo te digo —ordenó Tom—. Maggie, no puedo confiar en ti. No eres coherente. Pon la mano sobre la Biblia y di: renuncio a cualquier conversación privada y a cualquier trato con Philip Wakem a partir de este momento. Si no lo haces, nos avergonzaras a todos y apenarás a tu padre. ¿De qué sirve que me esfuerce y renuncie a todo para pagar las deudas de nuestro padre si tú vas a volverlo loco y avergonzarlo precisamente cuando podía empezar a levantar cabeza?

—Oh, Tom, ¿tan pronto van a pagarse las deudas? —preguntó Maggie, uniendo las manos con una repentina sensación de alegría, a pesar de la tristeza.

—Sí, si las cosas salen como tengo previsto. Pero —añadió Tom, con voz temblorosa por la indignación—, mientras yo luchaba y trabajaba para que mi padre tuviera un poco de paz espiritual antes de morir, mientras trabajaba por la respetabilidad de la familia, tú te has dedicado a hacer todo lo que podías para destruir ambas cosas.

Maggie sintió un profundo impulso de arrepentimiento: durante un momento, dejó de luchar contra una imposición que le parecía cruel e irracional y, movida por el sentimiento de culpa, justificó a su hermano.

—Tom —murmuró—. Me equivoqué, pero me sentía tan sola… Y Philip me daba tanta pena. Y creo que el odio y la enemistad son malos sentimientos.

—¡Tonterías! —contestó Tom—. Tu deber estaba muy claro. No digas nada más. Pero prométemelo con las palabras que yo te diga.

—Tengo que hablar con Philip una vez más.

—Irás conmigo ahora mismo y hablarás con él.

—Te prometo que no volveré a citarme con él ni a escribirle sin que tú lo sepas. Eso es lo único que diré. Pondré la mano sobre la Biblia, si quieres.

—Dilo, entonces.

Maggie puso la mano sobre la página manuscrita y repitió la promesa. Tom cerró el libro.

—Ahora, vamos —dijo.

Caminaron sin decir una palabra. Maggie padecía de antemano por lo que Philip iba a sufrir y temía las mortificantes palabras que caerían sobre él, procedentes de los labios de Tom; pero sentía que era inútil cualquier otra actitud que no fuera la sumisión. Tom tenía un poder tremendo sobre su conciencia y sus mayores temores: se estremecía ante la verdad incuestionable de la etiqueta que había puesto a su conducta y, sin embargo, toda su alma se rebelaba contra ella ya que, al ser incompleta, era también injusta. Tom, entre tanto, sentía que el ímpetu de su indignación se desviaba hacia Philip. No sabía cuánto del antiguo rechazo infantil, de mero orgullo y enemistad personal había en la amarga severidad de las palabras con que pretendía cumplir con su deber de hijo y hermano: Tom no era dado a interrogarse sutilmente sobre sus motivos ni otros asuntos intangibles; estaba seguro de que sus motivos y sus actos eran buenos, de no ser así, no serían suyos.

La única esperanza de Maggie era que, por primera vez, algo hubiera impedido acudir a Philip. Así se produciría una demora en la que podría pedir permiso a Tom para escribirle. El corazón le latía con redoblada violencia cuando llegaron bajo los pinos albares. Maggie pensó que aquel era el último momento de incertidumbre, ya que Philip siempre se reunía con ella al otro lado del bosquecillo. Pero cruzaron el espacio abierto y entraron en el sendero estrecho y tupido situado junto al montículo sin encontrarlo, hasta que al tomar un recodo, se toparon con él frente a frente, tan cerca que Tom y Philip se detuvieron bruscamente, a menos de una yarda de distancia. Durante unos instantes de silencio, Philip lanzó una mirada interrogante a Maggie y allí, en los labios separados y pálidos, y en la expresión aterrorizada de los grandes ojos*, vio* la respuesta. La

imaginación de Maggie, que siempre se adelantaba, desbocada, vio cómo su hermano alto y fuerte agarraba al débil Philip, lo aplastaba y lo pisoteaba.

—¿Le parece a usted que su comportamiento es propio de un hombre y un caballero, señor? —preguntó Tom con voz de áspero desdén en cuanto Philip volvió hacia él los ojos.

—¿A qué se refiere? —preguntó Philip con aire altivo.

—¿A qué me refiero? Aléjese, no vaya a ponerle encima las manos para explicarle a qué me refiero. Me refiero a aprovecharse de la estupidez y la ignorancia de una joven para obligarla a mantener entrevistas secretas con usted. Me refiero a atreverse a jugar con la respetabilidad de una familia que tiene un nombre honrado y decente que mantener.

—¡Lo niego por completo! —le interrumpió Philip impetuosamente—. Jamás podría jugar con algo que afectara a la felicidad de su hermana. La quiero más que usted mismo, la honro más de lo que usted hará nunca, daría mi vida por ella.

—¡No me cuente tonterías rimbombantes, caballero! ¿Pretende que no sabía que sería perjudicial para ella encontrarse aquí con usted, semana tras semana? ¿Pretende que tenía algún derecho a declararle su amor, aún en el caso de que pudiera ser un marido adecuado, cuando los padres de ambos jamás consentirían su matrimonio? ¡Y usted… usted intenta ganarse con astucia el afecto de una hermosa muchacha que todavía no tiene dieciocho años, aislada del mundo por las desventuras de su padre! Ése es su torcido sentido del honor, ¿verdad? Yo lo llamo abyecta traición, lo llamo aprovecharse de las circunstancias para obtener algo que es demasiado bueno para usted y que nunca conseguiría abiertamente.

—Resulta muy masculino por su parte hablarme de ese modo —señaló Philip con amargura, agitado por violentas emociones—. Los gigantes tienen un derecho inmemorial a la estupidez y al insulto insolente. Ni siquiera es capaz de entender lo que siento por su hermana. Tanto la quiero que podría incluso desear tener una relación amistosa con usted.

—Sentiría mucho ser capaz de entender sus sentimientos —dijo Tom con feroz desprecio—. Lo que deseo es que usted me entienda a mí: voy a ocuparme de mi hermana y si usted se atreve a hacer el menor intento de acercarse a ella, escribirle o tener sobre ella la menor influencia, su cuerpo

raquítico y miserable, que debería haberle hecho más modesto, no le servirá de protección alguna. Le daré una paliza, lo someteré a la vergüenza pública. ¿Quién no se reiría ante la idea de que fuera el enamorado de una muchacha hermosa?

—Tom, no quiero soportar esto, no quiero oír nada más —exclamó Maggie con voz convulsa.

—¡Quédate, Maggie! —dijo Philip, haciendo un gran esfuerzo para hablar. Después, mirando a Tom, añadió—: Ha arrastrado a su hermana hasta aquí para que vea cómo me amenaza y me insulta. Le parecía el modo más natural de influir sobre mí, pero está muy equivocado. Deje que hable su hermana. Si ella dice que está decidida a dejarme, acataré sus deseos al pie de la letra.

—Es por mi padre, Philip —imploró Maggie—. Tom me amenaza con contárselo a mi padre, y mi padre no podría soportarlo. Le he prometido, le he jurado solemnemente que no nos veremos sin que lo sepa.

—Es suficiente, Maggie. Yo no voy a cambiar, pero deseo que seas libre. Confía en mí, ya sabes que sólo te deseo cosas buenas.

—Sí —dijo Tom, exasperado por la actitud de Philip—, ahora habla mucho de lo que es bueno para ella, ¿pero pensó en ello antes?

—Sí, tal vez de modo un poco arriesgado. Pero deseaba que tuviera un amigo para toda la vida; un amigo que la apreciara, que le hiciera más justicia que ese hermano tosco y estrecho de miras por el que ella siempre se ha desvivido.

—Sí, mi manera de protegerla es distinta de la suya, y le diré cuál es la mía: yo la ayudaré a no desobedecer a su padre y hacerlo desgraciado, la ayudaré a que no se desperdicie con usted, a no convertirse en el hazmerreír de todo el mundo, a que no la desprecie un hombre como el padre de usted porque no es lo bastante buena para su hijo. Sabe muy bien qué clase de justicia y aprecio preparaba para ella. Yo no me impongo con bellas palabras, yo veo lo que significan los actos. Vámonos, Maggie.

Mientras hablaba, sujetó a Maggie por la muñeca derecha; ella extendió la mano izquierda. Philip la asió un instante con expresión ansiosa y después se alejó a toda prisa.

Tom y Maggie caminaron en silencio unos cuantos metros. Él seguía agarrándole la muñeca, como si arrastrara al culpable del escenario de sus actos. Finalmente, Maggie liberó la mano con un violento tirón y la irritación largo tiempo contenida estalló.

—No te creas que pienso que tienes razón, Tom, ni que me inclino ante tu voluntad. Desprecio los sentimientos que has mostrado al hablar con Philip y detesto el modo poco varonil en que lo has insultado aludiendo a su deformidad. Durante toda la vida has lanzado reproches a los demás, convencido de que tú tenías toda da razón: eso se debe a que eres tan estrecho de miras que no puedes ver que hay cosas mejores que tu conducta y tus mezquinas ambiciones.

—Sin duda —contestó Tom con frialdad—, no soy capaz de ver que tu conducta o tus objetivos sean mejores que los míos. Si tu comportamiento y el de Philip Wakem han sido correctos, ¿por qué os avergonzáis de que se sepa? Contéstame. Yo sí sé cuáles han sido mis objetivos y que los he conseguido. Ahora te ruego que me digas: ¿qué bien ha reportado tu conducta a ti o a dos demás?

—No quiero defenderme —dijo Maggie, todavía con vehemencia—. Sé que me he equivocado, muchas veces, continuamente. Sin embargo, algunas veces, cuando me he equivocado, ha sido debido a sentimientos que, si tú tuvieras, te harían mejor persona. Si alguna vez tú cometieras un error, si hubieras hecho algo muy malo, yo sentiría el dolor que te causara, no querría que se te castigara. Pero a ti siempre te ha gustado castigarme, siempre has sido duro y cruel conmigo; incluso cuando era pequeña y te quería más que a nadie en el mundo, eras capaz de dejarme ir a la cama sin perdonarme. No tienes piedad, no tienes la menor conciencia de tus imperfecciones ni de tus pecados. Es un pecado ser duro con los demás, no es propio de un mortal, de un cristiano. No eres más que un fariseo. Sólo agradeces a Dios tus virtudes; crees que son lo bastante grandes para compensar todo lo demás. ¡Ni siquiera intuyes que existen sentimientos junto a los cuales tus brillantes virtudes no son más que oscuridad!

—Bien —dijo Tom con frío tono de burla—, si tus sentimientos son mucho mejores que los míos, muéstralos de otro modo que no sea mediante una conducta que podría deshonrarnos a todos, que no sea con estos

bandazos de un lado a otro. Haz el favor de decirme cómo has demostrado ese amor hacia mi padre o hacia mí del que tanto hablas: desobedeciéndonos y engañándonos. Yo muestro mi afecto de otra manera.

—Porque eres un hombre, Tom, y tienes poder, y puedes hacer algo en este mundo.

—Entonces, si no puedes hacer nada, sométete a quienes sí pueden.

—Me someteré a lo que reconozco y siento que es justo. Me someteré incluso a los deseos poco razonables de mi padre, pero no a los tuyos. Alardeas de tus virtudes como si te dieran derecho a ser cruel y a comportarte de modo indigno de un hombre, como has hecho hoy. No creas que dejaré a Philip Wakem en señal de obediencia a ti. Esa deformidad que tanto insultas hará que me aferre a él y lo quiera todavía más.

—Muy bien, así es como tú ves las cosas —dijo Tom, más fríamente que nunca—. No hace falta que digas nada más para que me dé cuenta de lo mucho que nos separa. Será mejor que no lo olvidemos y callemos.

Tom regresó a Saint Ogg's para asistir a una cita con el tío Deane y recibir instrucciones sobre un viaje que debía emprender a la mañana siguiente.

Maggie subió a su habitación para verter en forma de lágrimas amargas toda la indignación ante la que Tom parecía blindado. Después, pasado el primer estallido de rabia insatisfecha, llegó el recuerdo de aquellos tiempos tranquilos, antes de que el placer que había terminado en la desdicha presente perturbara la claridad y simplicidad de su vida. En aquellos tiempos pensaba que había hecho grandes conquistas y había ganado un puesto duradero en las serenas alturas situadas por encima de las tentaciones y conflictos terrenales. Y, en cambio, se encontraba en el centro de una acalorada lucha entre sus pasiones y las de otros. Así pues, ¿la vida no era tan corta y el descanso perfecto no estaba tan cerca como había soñado cuando era dos años menor? La vida le reservaba más combates y tal vez nuevas caídas. Si hubiera creído que estaba completamente equivocada y Tom tenía toda la razón, habría podido recuperar antes la armonía interna, pero ahora su penitencia y sumisión se veían obstruidas constantemente por un resentimiento que no podía menos que considerar justo. Le sangraba el corazón cuando pensaba en Philip: recordaba los

insultos proferidos con una sensación tan nítida de lo que habría sentido Philip al oírlos que experimentaba un dolor casi físico que le hacía dar patadas en el suelo y apretar los puños.

Y, sin embargo, ¿cómo podía ser que, de vez en cuando, advirtiera que, en el fondo, experimentaba cierto alivio al haberse visto obligada a separarse de Philip? ¿Acaso se debía únicamente a que la sensación de que ya no ocultaba nada era bienvenida a cualquier precio?

Capítulo VI

Un triunfo costoso

Tres semanas más tarde, cuando el molino de Dorlcote se encontraba en el más hermoso momento del año —los grandes castaños en flor y la hierba crecida y cubierta de margaritas—, Tom Tulliver regresó una tarde más temprano que de costumbre y, mientras cruzaba el puente, contempló con un afecto profundamente arraigado la respetable casa de ladrillos rojos, que siempre parecía alegre y acogedora desde el exterior, aunque por dentro las habitaciones estuvieran desnudas y los corazones tristes. Los ojos de color azul grisáceo de Tom tienen una expresión agradable mientras mira hacia las ventanas de la casa: la arruga del ceño no desaparece, pero no le sienta mal: cuando los ojos y la boca adoptan una expresión más suave parece implicar una fuerza de voluntad sin dureza. Su paso firme se acelera mientras las comisuras de los labios se rebelan contra el esfuerzo por reprimir una sonrisa.

En aquel momento, las miradas del salón no estaban vueltas hacia el puente y el grupo permanecía sentado en silencio, sin aguardar a nadie: el señor Tulliver se encontraba en su sillón, cansado tras una larga cabalgada, meditando con aire agotado y con mirada fija en Maggie, que cosía inclinada sobre la labor mientras su madre preparaba el té.

Todos alzaron la vista sorprendidos cuando oyeron los conocidos pasos.

—Cómo, ¿qué pasa, Tom? —preguntó su padre—. Llegas más temprano que de costumbre.

—Oh, ya no tenía nada más que hacer, de manera que he vuelto. Hola, madre.

Tom se acercó a su madre y le dio un beso, señal en él de un buen humor inusual. Durante las tres semanas transcurridas apenas había cruzado con Maggie una mirada o una palabra; pero, dado su hermetismo habitual en casa, sus padres no lo habían advertido.

—Padre —dijo Tom, después de que terminaran el té—. ¿Sabe exactamente cuánto dinero hay en la caja de lata?

—Sólo ciento noventa y tres libras —dijo el señor Tulliver—. Últimamente has traído un poco menos, pero los jóvenes queréis hacer las cosas a vuestro modo con vuestro dinero. Aunque, antes de tener cierta edad, yo no hacía lo que quería —señaló con discreto descontento.

—¿Está seguro de que ésa es la cantidad, padre? —dijo Tom—. Desearía que se tomara la molestia de ir a buscar la caja de lata. Me parece que podría estar equivocado.

—¿Cómo iba a equivocarme? —contestó su padre bruscamente—. Lo he contado muchas veces, pero puedo ir a buscarla, si no me crees.

Dada su triste vida, al señor Tulliver le gustaba coger la caja y contar el dinero.

—No se vaya de la habitación, madre —dijo Tom cuando vio que ésta se movía en cuanto su padre salía de la habitación.

—¿Maggie tampoco? —preguntó la señora Tulliver—. Convendría recoger esto.

—Que ella haga lo que quiera —dijo Tom con indiferencia.

Aquellas palabras hirieron a Maggie. El corazón le había dado un brinco con la repentina convicción de que Tom iba a decir a su padre que podían pagarse las deudas, ¡y a Tom tanto le daba que estuviera o no cuando les comunicaba la noticia! Pero se llevó la bandeja y regresó de inmediato. No podía dejar que su herida se impusiera en un momento como aquél.

Tom se acercó a la esquina de la mesa, junto a su padre, cuando éste depositó la caja y la abrió; la luz rojiza del atardecer destacó el aire cansado y triste del padre de ojos negros y la alegría contenida del rostro del hijo de piel clara. La madre y Maggie se sentaron al otro extremo de la mesa; la una, llena de perpleja paciencia, la otra, palpitante de expectación.

El señor Tulliver contó el dinero y lo colocó en orden en la mesa, tras lo cual dijo, lanzando a Tom una mirada rápida.

—Ahí tienes. Ya ves como yo tenía razón.

Hizo una pausa y miró el dinero con amargo desaliento.

—Faltan más de trescientas y pasará mucho tiempo antes de que pueda ahorrarlo. La pérdida de cuarenta y dos libras con el trigo fue una faena. Este mundo es ya demasiado para mí. Nos ha costado cuatro años ahorrar esto… Vete a saber si estaré en este mundo cuatro años más. Deberé confiar en que tú las pagues —prosiguió con voz temblorosa—, si es que eres de esa opinión cuando crezcas… Pero es probable que me entierres primero.

Alzó los ojos hacia Tom con un quejumbroso deseo de confirmación.

—No, padre —dijo Tom, con enérgica decisión, aunque le temblaba un poco la voz—. Vivirá lo bastante para ver cómo se pagan las deudas. Las pagará usted mismo.

Su tono implicaba algo más que esperanza o decisión. Una ligera descarga eléctrica pareció recorrer al señor Tulliver, el cual miró fijamente a Tom con mirada interrogante, mientras Maggie, incapaz de contenerse, corría junto a su padre y se arrodillaba a su lado. Tom permaneció en silencio unos instantes antes de añadir:

—Hace tiempo, el tío Glegg me prestó un poco de dinero para comerciar y me ha ido bien. Tengo trescientas veinte libras en el banco.

En cuanto pronunció las últimas palabras, su madre le echó los brazos al cuello.

—¡Oh, hijo mío! Sabía que, en cuanto crecieras, lo arreglarías todo de nuevo —dijo, llorosa.

Pero su padre permanecía en silencio: la emoción le impedía hablar. Tom y Maggie temieron que la súbita alegría fuera excesiva para él, pero las lágrimas brotaron al fin, aliviándolo. El pecho ancho suspiró, los músculos del rostro se relajaron y el hombre de cabello gris estalló en sonoros sollozos. El ataque de llanto fue extinguiéndose y el hombre permaneció sentado, recobrando una respiración regular. Finalmente, alzó los ojos a su mujer.

—Bessy, ven y dame un beso —dijo con tono amable—. El muchacho *t'*ha desagraviado, quizá vuelvas a tener algunas comodidades.

Después de que ella lo besara y él retuviera su mano un minuto, sus pensamientos volvieron al dinero.

—Me habría gustado que trajeras el dinero para mirarlo, Tom —dijo, jugueteando con los soberanos que había sobre la mesa—. *M'*habría sentido más seguro.

—Lo verá usted mañana, padre —dijo Tom—. El tío Deane ha citado a los acreedores mañana en The *Golden Lion* y ha encargado una comida para ellos a las dos. El tío Glegg y yo también estaremos allí. Se anunció el sábado en el *Messenger*.

—¡Entonces, Wakem ya lo sabe! —exclamó Tulliver, con los ojos brillantes de fuego triunfal—. ¡Ah! —exclamó, con un sonido gutural, sacando la caja de rapé único lujo que se permitía ahora, y repiqueteando en ella con los restos de su viejo aire de desafío—. Ahora podré liberarme de su bota, aunque tenga que abandonar el viejo molino. Pensaba que moriría aquí, pero no podrá ser… ¿Tenemos una copa de algo en la casa, Bessy?

—Sí —dijo la señora Tulliver, sacando el manojo de llaves, ahora muy reducido—, queda un poco de *brandy* del que me trajo la hermana Deane cuando estuve enferma.

—Tráemelo, tráemelo, me siento un poco débil. Tom, hijo —dijo con voz más fuerte, tras tomar un poco de *brandy* con agua—. Tendrás que pronunciar unas palabras ante ellos. Les diré que has sido tú quien ha reunido la mayor parte del dinero. Por fin verán que soy un hombre honrado y tengo un hijo honrado. ¡Ah! ¡Lo que le gustaría a Wakem tener un hijo como el mío, un muchacho estupendo, en lugar *d'*esa pobre criatura jorobada! Prosperarás en este mundo, hijo mío; quizá llegues a ver el día en que Wakem y su hijo se encuentren por debajo de ti. Es probable que *t'*hagan socio de alguna compañía, como le sucedió a tu tío Deane, vas por buen camino; entonces nada te impedirá hacerte rico… Y, si alguna vez eres lo bastante rico, no lo olvides, intenta comprar de nuevo el molino.

El señor Tulliver se recostó en la butaca. Su pensamiento, que durante largo tiempo no había albergado más que amargo descontento y malos presentimientos, se vio lleno, gracias a la magia de la alegría, de visiones de fortuna. Pero una influencia sutil le impedía ver ese futuro afortunado como propio.

—Dame la mano, muchacho —dijo, tendiendo súbitamente la suya—. Es muy importante que un hombre pueda estar orgulloso de su hijo, y yo tengo esa suerte.

Tom no conoció en su vida un momento tan delicioso como aquél, y Maggie olvidó sus agravios sin proponérselo. Sin duda, Tom era bueno; y en la dulce humildad que brota de nosotros en momentos de sincera admiración y gratitud, tuvo la sensación de que Tom había redimido sus culpas y, en cambio, ella no. No sintió celos aquella noche cuando, por primera vez, pareció ocupar un lugar insignificante en el pensamiento de su padre.

La conversación fue larga antes de que se acostaran. Como es natural, el señor Tulliver quiso conocer todos los detalles de las aventuras comerciales de Tom y los escuchó con animación y deleite. Sentía curiosidad por saber todo lo que se había dicho en cada ocasión y, si era posible, incluso lo que se había pensado; y la participación de Bob Jakin en el negocio lo empujó a extraños estallidos de afinidad con la triunfante sabiduría de aquel notable buhonero. Evocó la historia juvenil de Bob, tal como la conocía, como si contuviera asombrosas sorpresas, actitud frecuente cuando se recuerda la infancia de los grandes hombres.

Fue algo afortunado que se interesara por la narración de los hechos y contuviera la vaga, aunque intensa, sensación de triunfo sobre Wakem que, de otro modo, habría sido el canal por el que habría fluido su alegría con peligrosa fuerza. Con todo, este sentimiento se imponía de vez en cuando y lo empujaba a repentinos estallidos de exclamaciones que no venían al caso.

Aquella noche, el señor Tulliver tardó en conciliar el sueño y éste, cuando llegó, estuvo lleno de vívidas fantasías. A las cinco y media de la mañana, cuando la señora Tulliver se levantaba, se alarmó al ver que su marido se incorporaba con un grito ahogado y miraba con aire desconcertado hacia las paredes del dormitorio.

—¿Qué te pasa, Tulliver? —preguntó su esposa. Él la miró con aire desconcertado.

—¡Ah…! Soñaba… ¿He hecho ruido?… —dijo finalmente—. Estaba soñando que lo tenía agarrado entre las manos.

Capítulo VII

Juicio final

El señor Tulliver era un hombre esencialmente sobrio, capaz de tomar una copa a gusto, pero que nunca rebasaba los limites de la moderación. Poseía un temperamento activo, similar al de Hotspur, que no necesitaba fuego liquido para animarse; por lo general, su impetuosidad estaba a la altura de cualquier ocasión excitante sin refuerzos de esa clase, y el deseo de tomar agua con *brandy* implicaba que una alegría demasiado repentina había caído como un sobresalto peligroso en un cuerpo deprimido por cuatro años de tristeza y una carga inusualmente dura. Pero aquel primer momento de inestabilidad pasó y pareció recuperar las fuerzas a medida que incrementaba su entusiasmo y, al día siguiente, cuando se encontró sentado ante la mesa con sus acreedores, con los ojos encendidos y las mejillas sonrojadas con la conciencia de que estaba a punto de ofrecer de nuevo una apariencia honorable, se parecía al Tulliver de otros tiempos, orgulloso, seguro de sí mismo, cálido en el trato y en el carácter, mucho más de lo que le habría parecido posible a cualquiera que se hubiera cruzado con él una semana antes, cabalgando, tal como había sido su costumbre durante los últimos cuatro años, desde que la sensación de fracaso y las deudas habían caído sobre él: cuando, con la cabeza gacha, lanzaba miradas breves y reticentes si no tenía otro remedio. Pronunció un discurso y declaró sus honrados principios con su antiguo entusiasmo; aludió a los bribones y a la suerte que había tenido en contra, pero que gracias al esfuerzo y a la ayuda de un buen hijo, había triunfado sobre ellos; terminó su intervención

contando el modo en que Tom había conseguido la mayor parte de aquel dinero tan necesario. Pero la irritación y triunfo hostil pareció diluirse durante un rato en el más puro orgullo y placer paterno cuando, después de que se propusiera un brindis a la salud de Tom y el tío Deane aprovechara la ocasión para dirigir unas pocas palabras de elogio sobre el carácter y la conducta de éste, el muchacho se puso en pie y pronunció el único discurso de su vida. Difícilmente pudo haber sido más breve: dio las gracias a los caballeros presentes por el honor que le habían hecho. Se alegraba de haber podido ayudar a su padre a demostrar su integridad y recuperar su buen nombre y, por su parte, esperaba no deshacer lo hecho ni manchar su apellido. Pero el aplauso que siguió fue tan grande y Tom tenía un aire tan caballeroso, tan alto y derecho, que el señor Tulliver destacó, a modo de explicación a sus amigos situados a su izquierda y a su derecha, que había gastado mucho dinero en la educación de su hijo.

El grupo se separó con toda sobriedad a las cinco. Tom permaneció en Saint Ogg's para ocuparse de algunos asuntos y el señor Tulliver montó su caballo para dirigirse a casa y describir los memorables acontecimientos, todo lo dicho y hecho, a «la pobre Bessy y a la mocit». El aire de animación que lo envolvía apenas se debía al buen humor o a cualquier otro estímulo, sino al fuerte vino de la alegría triunfante. Ese día no escogió ninguna calle apartada, sino que cabalgó lentamente, con la cabeza bien alta y mirando de un lado a otro por la calle principal, de camino hacia el puente. ¿Por qué no podía encontrarse con Wakem? Le mortificaba que no se produjera esa coincidencia y se puso a darle vueltas a la idea con cierta irritación. Quizá Wakem hubiera salido aquel día de la población a propósito para no ver ni oír nada sobre el acto honorable que había tenido lugar y que tal vez lo mortificara un poco. Si por casualidad se encontraba con Wakem, el señor Tulliver lo miraría directamente a la cara, y el muy bribón tal vez se achantara un poco ante su altivez fría y dominante. No tardaría en entender que no iba a seguir teniendo a su servicio a un hombre honrado y que su honradez dejaría de llenar una bolsa ya llena de ganancias ilícitas. Tal vez la suerte estaba empezando a cambiar: quizá el demonio no tenía siempre las mejores cartas en este mundo.

Con los pensamientos en ebullición, el señor Tulliver se aproximó a la puerta de la cerca del molino de Dorlcote y se acercó lo bastante para ver que una figura bien conocida salía por ella montada en un hermoso caballo negro. Se encontraron a unas cincuenta yardas de las puertas, entre los grandes castaños y olmos y el talud.

—Tulliver —dijo Wakem bruscamente, en tono más altivo que de costumbre—. Qué tontería es esa que ha hecho esparciendo los terrones duros en el cercado. Ya le dije lo que tenía que hacer, pero algunos no son capaces de aprender a trabajar la tierra con método.

—¡Oh! —dijo Tulliver, estallando repentinamente—. Entonces, búsquese para ese trabajo a uno que quiera recibir clases.

—Imagino que ha estado bebiendo —dijo Wakem, convencido de que eso explicaba el rostro congestionado de Tulliver y el brillo de sus ojos.

—No, no he bebido —dijo Tulliver—. No quiero que la bebida me ayude a tomar la decisión de no seguir trabajando para un sinvergüenza.

—¡Muy bien! Entonces, abandone mis tierras mañana, contenga su lengua insolente y déjeme pasar.

Tulliver estaba haciendo retroceder a su caballo para bloquear el paso a Wakem.

—No, no pienso dejarle pasar —dijo Tulliver, furioso—. Primero le diré lo que pienso de usted. Es un bribón demasiado grande para que lo cuelguen, es…

—Déjeme pasar, bruto ignorante, o me echaré encima.

El señor Tulliver, espoleando su caballo y alzando el látigo, se lanzó hacia delante, y el caballo de Wakem, tras retroceder y tambalearse, tiró al jinete de la silla y lo echó al suelo junto a él. Wakem tuvo la presencia de ánimo de soltar la brida de inmediato y, mientras el caballo daba unos cuantos pasos tambaleándose y recuperaba el equilibrio, podría haberse levantado y haber montado de nuevo sin más inconvenientes que una sacudida y una contusión. Pero antes de que pudiera levantarse, Tulliver había desmontado. La visión de aquel hombre tan odiado a su merced lo lanzó a un frenesí de venganza triunfal que parecía darle una agilidad y una fuerza extraordinarias. Se precipitó hacia Wakem, que estaba intentando ponerse en pie, lo agarró por el brazo izquierdo, de modo que todo el peso

del hombre se apoyaba en el derecho, que seguía sobre el suelo, y le azotó ferozmente la espalda con la fusta. Wakem gritó pidiendo ayuda, pero no obtuvo ninguna hasta que se oyó el grito de una mujer y el grito de «¡Padre, Padre!».

De repente, Wakem advirtió que algo había detenido el brazo del señor Tulliver, ya que cesaron los azotes y la mano que lo sujetaba se relajó.

—¡Fuera! ¡Vete! —gritó Tulliver, furioso. Pero no se dirigía a Wakem.

El abogado se levantó lentamente y, al volver la cabeza, vio que Tulliver no se había detenido por temor a lastimar a la joven que se aferraba a él, sino porque ésta le sujetaba los brazos con todas sus fuerzas.

—¡Luke! ¡Madre! ¡Vengan a ayudar al señor Wakem! —gritó Maggie cuando por fin oyó que se acercaban unos pasos.

—Ayúdame a subir a este caballo, que es más bajo —dijo Wakem a Luke—, quizá pueda, aunque, maldita sea, me parece que tengo el brazo dislocado.

Con cierta dificultad subieron a Wakem al caballo de Tulliver. Después se volvió hacia el molinero.

—Lo pagará muy caro, se lo aseguro —dijo, pálido de ira—. Su hija es testigo de que me ha atacado.

—Me da igual —dijo el señor Tulliver con voz gruesa y feroz—. Vaya por ahí enseñando cómo tiene la espalda y diga que le he dado latigazos. Cuénteles que ahora este mundo es un poco más justo.

—Lleva mi caballo a mi casa —ordenó Wakem a Luke—. Por el transbordador de Toften, no por el centro del pueblo.

—¡Padre, entre en casa! —imploró Maggie. Después, viendo que Wakem se había marchado y que ya no era posible que se repitieran las escenas de violencia, soltó a su padre y estalló en sollozos histéricos, mientras la pobre señora Tulliver permanecía en pie en silencio, temblando de miedo. Sin embargo, Maggie advirtió que, a medida que soltaba a su padre, éste empezaba a sujetarse y a apoyarse en ella. La sorpresa puso fin a las lágrimas.

—Me encuentro mal, estoy débil —dijo—. Ayúdame a entrar en casa, Bessy. Estoy mareado, me duele la cabeza.

Entró lentamente, sostenido por su esposa y su hija, y se tambaleó hasta el sillón. El tono encendido de su rostro se había convertido en palidez y tenía las manos frías.

—¿No sería mejor que enviáramos a buscar al médico? —dijo la señora Tulliver.

Él parecía sufrir demasiado y encontrarse demasiado débil para oírla, pero cuando la señora Tulliver dijo a Maggie: «Encárgate de que alguien vaya a buscar al médic», la miró, perfectamente consciente.

—¿Al médico? No, nada de médicos —dijo—. Sólo me duele la cabeza. Ayudadme a meterme en la cama.

¡Triste final del día que había amanecido para todos como el principio de tiempos mejores! Pero cuando se mezclan las semillas, las cosechas salen mezcladas.

Media hora después de que su padre se hubiera acostado, Tom llegó a casa. Bob Jakin iba con él; había acudido con la intención de felicitar «al antiguo am», no sin cierto orgullo justificado por el modo en que había contribuido a la suerte del señor Tom; y Tom había pensado que a su padre le encantaría terminar el día charlando con Bob. Sin embargo, Tom, tuvo que pasar la tarde en la triste espera de las consecuencias desagradables que tendría el loco estallido de aquella rabia que su padre había contenido durante tanto tiempo. Después de que le comunicaran las dolorosas noticias, Tom permaneció sentado y en silencio: no tenía ánimos ni ganas de contar a su madre y a su hermana nada de lo sucedido durante la comida, y ellas apenas se preocuparon de preguntárselo. Se diría que en el tejido de su vida, las hebras se entrelazaban de tal modo que no podían tener una alegría sin que llegara enseguida la pena. Tom se sentía abatido al pensar que sus esfuerzos ejemplares siempre se veían frustrados por los errores ajenos: Maggie revivía, una y otra vez, el agónico momento en que corrió para lanzarse sobre el brazo de su padre, con un vago y siniestro presentimiento de las penas que los esperaban. Ninguno de los tres estaba particularmente alarmado por la salud del señor Tulliver: los síntomas no se parecían a los del anterior ataque y se diría que, simplemente, como consecuencia necesaria de la pasión violenta y el esfuerzo realizado tras varias horas de

una excitación extraordinaria, había caído enfermo. Probablemente, el descanso lo curaría.

Tom, cansado tras un día tan agitado, no tardó en caer en un profundo sueño; tuvo la sensación de que acababa de acostarse cuando se despertó y encontró a su madre de pie, a su lado, iluminada por la luz grisácea del amanecer.

—Hijo, levántate ahora mismo: he mandado a buscar al médico y tu padre quiere que Maggie y tú vayáis a su lado.

—¿Está peor, madre?

—Ha pasado la noche con mucho dolor de cabeza, pero no ha dicho que se encontrara peor. Sólo ha dicho de repente: «Bessy, ve a buscar al chico y a la chica. Diles que se den pris».

Maggie y Tom se vistieron apresuradamente bajo la fría luz grisácea y llegaron al dormitorio de su padre casi en el mismo momento. Él los aguardaba con el ceño fruncido de dolor, pero con la mirada consciente y alerta. La señora Tulliver estaba de pie a los pies de la cama, asustada y temblorosa, con aspecto ajado y envejecido tras la noche en vela. Maggie llegó primera a la cabecera, pero su padre miró a Tom, el cual se acercó y se detuvo a su lado.

—Tom, hijo mío. No volveré a levantarme… Este mundo ha sido demasiado para mí, pero tú has hecho todo lo que has podido por hacerlo un poco más justo. Dame la mano, hijo, antes de que me vaya.

El padre y el hijo se estrecharon la mano con fuerza y se miraron unos instantes.

—Padre —dijo Tom, intentando hablar con voz firme—, ¿tiene usted algún deseo que yo pueda cumplir cuando…?

—Sí, hijo… intenta recuperar el molino.

—Sí, padre.

—En cuanto a tu madre… intenta compensarla tanto como puedas por mi mala suerte… Y la mocita…

El padre volvió los ojos hacia Maggie con una mirada todavía más inquieta cuando ella, sin poderse contener, se arrodilló para estar más cerca del querido y ajado rostro que, durante largos años, había sido para ella símbolo del amor más profundo y del más duro de los sufrimientos.

—Debes cuidarla, Tom… no *t'*inquietes, mocita… Alguien te querrá y estará de tu parte… Y debes ser bueno con ella, hijo… Yo siempre *m'*he portado bien con mi hermana. Dame un beso, Maggie… Ven, Bessy… Tom, intenta pagar una tumba de obra para que tu madre y yo podamos estar juntos.

Tras decir estas palabras, apartó la vista y permaneció en silencio durante unos minutos mientras lo observaban, sin atreverse a moverse. La luz del amanecer era ya más intensa y pudieron ver que sus rasgos se hacían más pesados y los ojos más opacos.

—Por lo menos, llegó mi momento… Le pegué —dijo finalmente, mirando hacia Tom—. Ha sido justo. Nunca he querido nada más que lo que es justo.

—Pero padre, querido padre —dijo Maggie con una indecible ansiedad que se imponía sobre su dolor—: ¿le perdona? ¿Perdona a todo el mundo?

No movió los ojos hacia ella.

—No, mocita mía. No le perdono… ¿De qué sirve el perdón? No puedo querer a un bribón…

Tenía la voz cada vez más ronca, pero quena decir algo más y movió los labios, una y otra vez, luchando por hablar. Al final, las palabras se abrieron paso.

—¿Acaso Dios perdona a los bribones? Si los perdona, no será muy severo conmigo.

Movió las manos con inquietud, como si quisiera apartar un peso que lo aplastara. En dos o tres ocasiones pronunció palabras inconexas.

—Este mundo… es demasiado… un hombre honrado… qué enredoso. Pronto se convirtieron en balbuceos, los ojos dejaron de ver y llegó el silencio final.

Pero no la muerte. Durante algo más de una hora, el pecho se movió y continuó la respiración ruidosa y pesada, haciéndose cada vez más lenta, mientras un frío rocío le cubría la frente.

Al final llegó la calma y la pobre y poco iluminada alma de Tulliver dejó de sufrir con el doloroso misterio de este mundo.

Entonces llegó la ayuda: aparecieron Luke y su esposa y también el doctor Turnbull, demasiado tarde para nada más que certificar la muerte.

Tom y Maggie bajaron juntos al salón, donde el sillón de su padre estaba vacío. Ambos volvieron los ojos hacia el mismo lugar.

—Tom, perdóname —dijo Maggie—. Querámonos siempre el uno al otro. Se abrazaron y se echaron a llorar.

VOLUMEN III

Libro sexto

La gran tentación

Capítulo I

El dúo en el paraíso

El bien amueblado salón con el piano de cola abierto y la agradable vista sobre un jardín que desciende suavemente hasta un cobertizo situado en un embarcadero junto al Floss es el de la casa del señor Deane. La pulcra damita vestida de luto cuyos tirabuzones de color castaño claro caen sobre el bordado de colores en que entretiene los dedos es, naturalmente, Lucy Deane; y el apuesto joven que se inclina de su silla para cerrar las tijeras con un chasquido ante el rostro diminuto del spaniel King Charles acostado sobre los pies de la joven dama no es otro que Stephen Guest, cuyo anillo con un brillante, perfume a rosas y aire de ociosa despreocupación a las doce del mediodía son el gracioso y aromático resultado del mayor molino de aceite y el muelle más grande de Saint Ogg's. El gesto con las tijeras es de una trivialidad aparente, pero el lector percibe al instante que hay detrás una intención que lo hace digno de un joven de cabeza grande y largos miembros; porque el lector advierte que Lucy desea las tijeras y se ve obligada, aunque a regañadientes, a echar atrás los rizos, alzar los dulces ojos de color avellana y sonreír amablemente al rostro que tiene a la altura de las rodillas mientras tiende la nacarada mano.

—Haga el favor de darme las tijeras, si es capaz de renunciar al gran placer de mortificar a mi pobre *Minny*.

Al parecer, las tontas tijeras se han trabado en los nudillos y Hércules le tiende los dedos, atrapados sin remisión.

—¡Malditas tijeras! El ojo ovalado está al revés. Por favor, quítemelas.

—Quíteselas con la otra mano —sugiere Lucy con picardía.

Ah, es que es la mano izquierda y yo no soy zurdo.

Lucy se ríe y saca las tijeras dando golpecitos con sus diminutos dedos, cosa que, como es natural, predispone al señor Stephen a iniciar una repetición *da capo*, por lo cual aguarda a que éstas queden libres otra vez para apoderarse de ellas.

—No, no —protesta Lucy, guardándolas—. No voy a dejar que las coja otra vez, ya me las ha forzado. Y no haga gruñir a *Minny*. Si se sienta y se comporta correctamente, le daré una noticia.

—¿De qué se trata? —preguntó Stephen, recostándose en la silla y pasando el brazo derecho por encima de una de las esquinas del respaldo. Podría haber estado posando para un retrato que representara a un apuesto joven de veinticinco años, de frente cuadrada, cabello de color castaño oscuro, corto y tieso, pero con una ligera ondulación en las puntas, como un denso campo de trigo, y una mirada entre ardiente y sarcástica bajo unas bien perfiladas cejas horizontales—. ¿Es una noticia muy importante?

—Sí, mucho. Adivínela.

—Que va a cambiar la dieta de *Minny* y le va a dar a diario tres galletitas de ratafía mojadas en nata.

—Totalmente equivocado.

—Bien; entonces, que el doctor Kenn ha estado predicando contra el bucarán y las damas de la localidad le han enviado una petición colectiva diciéndole que es una doctrina muy dura y no pueden soportarla.

—¡Debería darle vergüenza! —exclamó Lucy, frunciendo los labios con seriedad—. Es muy antipático por su parte que no lo adivine, porque se trata de algo que le mencioné hace poco.

—Pero usted me ha hablado de muchas cosas. ¿Acaso su tiranía femenina exige que cuando dice que lo ha mencionado alguna vez, yo lo adivine de inmediato?

—Sí, ya sé que piensa que soy boba.

—Pienso que es usted encantadora.

—¿Y la bobería forma parte de mi encanto?

—Jamás dije tal cosa.

—Pero yo sé que le gusta que las mujeres sean sosas. Philip Wakem lo traicionó y dijo eso un día cuando usted no estaba.

—Oh, ya sé que Phil se lo toma muy en serio, lo convierte en una cuestión personal. Me parece que tiene que estar enamorado de alguna dama desconocida, alguna maravillosa Beatriz que conoció en el extranjero.

—¡Por cierto! —exclamó Lucy, dejando unos instantes la labor—. Se me acaba de ocurrir que no he averiguado si mi prima Maggie se negará a ver a Philip, tal como hace su hermano. Tom no quiere entrar en una sala si sabe que Philip está allí. Quizá Maggie piense igual y entonces no podremos formar el coro.

—Vaya, ¿su prima va a venir a pasar unos días? —preguntó Stephen con expresión de ligero fastidio.

—Sí, ésa era la noticia que usted había olvidado. Va a dejar su trabajo, en el que ha pasado casi dos años, pobrecilla. Desde que murió su padre. Y se quedará conmigo un mes o dos. Espero que varios meses.

—¿Y se supone que debo alegrarme con esa noticia?

—Oh, no. En absoluto —dijo Lucy, con aire levemente ofendido—. Yo sí estoy contenta, pero eso, naturalmente, no es motivo para que usted se alegre. Mi prima Maggie es la amiga que más quiero en este mundo.

Y supongo que, cuando esté aquí, serán ustedes inseparables. No tendré la menor posibilidad de volver a tener un *tête á tête* con usted, a menos que le encuentre usted un admirador con el que emparejarla de vez en cuando. ¿Y cuál es la causa de ese rechazo hacia Philip? Podría haber sido un buen recurso.

—Es una pelea de familia con el padre de Philip. Creo que fue en circunstancias muy dolorosas, pero nunca lo he entendido ni lo he sabido todo. Mi tío Tulliver tuvo mala suerte y perdió todas sus propiedades, y, según creo, consideraba que el señor Wakem era, de un modo u otro, la causa. El señor Wakem compró el molino de Dorlcote, la antigua casa de mi tío, donde había vivido toda su vida. Recordará usted a mi tío Tulliver, ¿verdad?

—No —contestó Stephen con una indiferencia algo altiva—. Conozco el nombre de toda la vida y me atrevería a decir que conocía de vista al

individuo. Conozco la mitad de los nombres y rostros del vecindario, pero soy incapaz de relacionarlos.

—Era un hombre muy irascible. Recuerdo que cuando era pequeña e iba a visitar a mis primos, muchas veces me asustaba porque hablaba como si estuviera enfadado. Papá me contó que hubo una pelea terrible la misma víspera de la muerte de mi tío entre él y el señor Wakem, pero se echó tierra sobre el asunto. Todo esto sucedió cuando usted estaba en Londres. Papá dice que mi tío se equivocó en muchas cosas, que era un hombre amargado. Sin duda, para Maggie y para Tom ha de ser muy doloroso recordar estas cosas. Han sufrido muchos, muchos disgustos. Seis años atrás Maggie estaba conmigo en el colegio cuando se la llevaron debido a la desgracia de su padre y, según creo, desde entonces no ha conocido apenas ninguna diversión. Desde la muerte de su padre, ha tenido un empleo muy precario en un colegio, porque está decidida a ser independiente y no vivir con la tía Pullet; y entonces no le pude pedir que viniera conmigo porque mi querida mamá estaba enferma y todo era muy triste. Por eso quiero que venga ahora y pase unas vacaciones muy, muy largas.

—Eso es muy amable y angelical por su parte —dijo Stephen, mirándola con una sonrisa de admiración—, y todavía más si la muchacha posee la misma capacidad para la conversación que su madre.

—¡Pobrecita tía! Es usted cruel al ridiculizarla. Sé muy bien lo útil que me resulta. Lleva la casa muy bien, lo hace mucho mejor que cualquier desconocida. Y fue para mí de gran consuelo durante la enfermedad de mamá.

—Sí, pero en lo que respecta a la compañía, prefiero la de sus cerezas al *brandy* y los pastelillos de crema. Me estremezco al pensar en que su hija esté siempre presente en persona, sin los agradables representantes de su madre: una chica rubia y gorda, con redondos ojos azules que nos mire fijamente en silencio.

—¡Oh, sí! —exclamó Lucy, riendo con malicia y batiendo palmas—. ¡Así es exactamente mi prima Maggie! ¡Seguro que la ha visto alguna vez!

—Lo cierto es que no: sólo adivino cómo tiene que ser la hija de la señora Tulliver. Y además, si va a echar a Philip, lo más parecido que tenemos a un tenor, será un fastidio adicional.

—Espero que no. Me parece que le rogaré a usted que visite a Philip y le diga que Maggie vendrá mañana. Conoce bien los sentimientos de Tom y siempre se mantiene alejado; de modo que si usted le dice que le he rogado que le advierta que no venga hasta que yo le escriba pidiéndoselo, lo entenderá.

—Preferiría que escribiera una notita. Phil es tan sensible que cualquier cosa bastaría para que dejara de venir, y nos costó mucho que participara. No consigo convencerlo nunca de que venga al Park: me parece que no le gustan mis hermanas. Sólo su toque feérico, Lucy, consigue aplacar sus plumas alborotadas.

Stephen se apoderó de la manita que se extendía hacia la mesa y la rozó con los labios. La pequeña Lucy se sentía feliz y orgullosa. Ella y Stephen se encontraban en esa etapa del cortejo que constituye el instante más exquisito de la juventud, el más tierno momento de floración de la pasión: cuando ambos están seguros del amor del otro pero no ha habido ninguna declaración formal y todo son adivinaciones mutuas que exaltan las palabras más triviales y el menor gesto para convertirlos en estremecimientos delicados y deliciosos como vaharadas de aroma a jazmín. Cuando el compromiso se hace explícito desaparece este sutil estado de susceptibilidad: entonces el jazmín está ya cogido y presentado en un gran ramo.

—Es rarísimo que haya adivinado tan exactamente el aspecto y los modales de Maggie —comentó la maliciosa Lucy, encaminándose a su escritorio—, porque bien podría haber sido como su hermano; y Tom no tiene los ojos redondos y jamás se le ocurriría mirar fijamente a los demás.

—¡Oh! Supongo que Tom salió a su padre, parece más orgulloso que el diablo. Aunque tampoco es un compañero muy brillante, diría yo.

—Me gusta Tom. Me regaló mi *Minny* cuando perdí a *Lolo. Y* papá lo quiere mucho, dice que Tom tiene excelentes principios. Gracias a él, su padre pudo pagar todas las deudas antes de morir.

—Ah, sí. Ya lo he oído contar; oí que su padre y el mío hablaban de ello en una de las interminables conversaciones de negocios que mantienen después de comer. Piensan hacer algo para ayudar al joven Tulliver, ya que les evitó enormes pérdidas cabalgando hasta aquí como un héroe, algo así

como Turpin, para informarles de que un banco iba a suspender pagos o algo parecido, pero en aquel momento yo estaba medio dormido.

Stephen se levantó del asiento y paseó en dirección al piano, tarareando en falsete la melodía de «Amado consort» mientras pasaba las páginas del volumen de *La creación* que permanecía abierto en el atril.

—Venga usted a cantar esto —dijo cuando vio que Lucy se levantaba.

—¿«Amado consort»? No creo que encaje con su voz.

—No importa, encaja exactamente con mis sentimientos, que, como diría Philip, es lo fundamental para cantar bien. He advertido que muchos hombres con voces mediocres tienden a ser de esa opinión.

—El otro día Philip la tomó contra *La creación* —comentó Lucy, sentándose al piano—. Dice que contiene cierta complacencia dulzona, cierta fantasía aduladora, como si se hubiera escrito para la fiesta de cumpleaños de un gran duque alemán.

—Bah, él es el Adán caído y amargado; nosotros somos unos Adán y Eva que no caen y viven en el paraíso. Bien, empecemos por el recitativo, honrando a la moral. Usted cantará lo que es el deber de la mujer: «Obedecerte me procura alegría, felicidad y glori».

—Oh, no. No pienso respetar a un Adán que lleva el *tempo* tan lento como usted —dijo Lucy, empezando a tocar el dúo.

Sin duda, el único cortejo que no conoce dudas ni temores será aquel en que los enamorados puedan cantar juntos. La sensación de mutua afinidad que surge de las dos notas profundas que satisfacen la expectación en el momento oportuno entre las notas de la voz argentina de la soprano, del acorde perfecto de las terceras y las quintas descendentes, de la amorosa persecución de una fuga acordada… es probable que todo ello sustituya a cualquier exigencia inmediata de formas de acuerdo menos apasionadas. La contralto no se ocupa de catequizar al bajo; el tenor no temerá una embarazosa falta de conversación en las tardes que pase con la hermosa soprano. En las provincias, donde la música era tan escasa en aquellos tiempos remotos, ¿cómo podían los aficionados a la música dejar de enamorarse unos de otros? Incluso los principios políticos debían de correr peligro de relajarse en esas circunstancias; y un violín fiel a los burgos podridos debía de sentirse tentado de confraternizar de modo

desmoralizador con un violoncelo reformista. En ese caso, la soprano con garganta de pájaro y el bajo de voz plena cantarían:

Junto a ti aumenta cada gozo,
junto a ti la vida es alegría.

Y se lo creerían, especialmente porque lo cantaban.

Ahora, cantemos el gran fragmento de Rafael —dijo Lucy cuando terminaron el dúo—. Lo de «la tierra cede bajo el peso de las bestia» le sale a usted a la perfección.

—Eso parece un cumplido —señaló Stephen, mirando el reloj de bolsillo—. ¡Por Júpiter, si es casi la una y media! Bueno, sólo puedo cantar eso. Stephen cantó con admirable facilidad las profundas notas que representaban la amenaza de las pesadas bestias: pero cuando un cantante tiene dos oyentes, siempre es posible la disparidad de opiniones. La dueña de *Minny* estaba encantada, pero el perro, que se había atrincherado en su cesta, temblando, en cuanto empezó a sonar la música, consideró que aquel trueno era tan poco de su gusto que saltó y se marchó correteando hasta el más remoto *chiffonier*, considerándolo el lugar más seguro Para que un perrito esperara el juicio final.

—Adiós, amada consorte —dijo Stephen, abrochándose la chaqueta en cuanto terminó de cantar, sonriendo desde su alta estatura con el aire de amado condescendiente, a la damita situada delante del atril—. Mi gozo ya no aumenta, porque tengo que marcharme a casa. He prometido estar allí para comer.

—Entonces, ¿no podrá usted pasar a ver a Philip? No importa, se lo he dicho todo en la nota.

—Mañana estará usted ocupada con su prima, imagino.

—Sí, vamos a celebrar una pequeña fiesta familiar. Mi primo Tom comerá con nosotros y la pobre tiíta tendrá a sus dos hijos junto a ella por primera vez en mucho tiempo. Será muy bonito y me hace mucha ilusión.

—¿Podré venir pasado mañana?

—¡Oh, sí! Venga y le presentaré a mi prima Maggie, aunque, en realidad, se diría que ya la ha visto… La ha descrito tan bien…

—Adiós, entonces.

Tras una leve presión de las manos y un breve encuentro de miradas como aquéllos, es frecuente que una damita quede levemente ruborizada y con una sonrisa en los labios que no desaparece en cuanto se cierra la puerta, y tienda a caminar de aquí para allá por la habitación en lugar de sentarse tranquilamente ante su bordado u otra ocupación racional y edificante. Por lo menos, ése fue el efecto que causó en Lucy; y espero que no consideres, lector, indicio de que la vanidad se imponía sobre otros impulsos más tiernos el que echara algún vistazo al espejo de la chimenea cuando sus pasos la acercaban a éste. El deseo de saber que una no ha tenido aspecto de espantajo durante las escasas horas de conversación puede considerarse parte de una atención laudable y generosa hacia los demás. Y el carácter de Lucy era tan benevolente que tiendo a creer que impregnaba incluso sus pequeños egoísmos, de la misma manera que en otras personas, de todos conocidas, los pequeños gestos benevolentes poseen un aroma, algo fétido, a egoísmo. Incluso en este momento, mientras camina arriba y abajo con un latido levemente triunfal en su corazón juvenil y la sensación de que la ama la persona más importante de su reducido mundo, se observa en sus ojos avellana una omnipresente y risueña benignidad en la que los efímeros destellos de vanidad casi han desaparecido, y si es feliz cuando piensa en su enamorado, es porque sus pensamientos se mezclan rápidamente con todas los dulces afectos y bondadosos cometidos con que llena sus apacibles días. Incluso en este momento, con esta alternancia instantánea que hace que dos corrientes de sentimientos o fantasías parezcan simultáneas, su pensamiento pasa continuamente de Stephen a los preparativos inacabados para la habitación de Maggie. La prima Maggie debía recibir el mismo trato que una gran dama: no, mejor incluso, porque tendría en su dormitorio los mejores dibujos e ilustraciones de Lucy, y el mejor ramo de flores primaverales sobre la mesa. A Maggie le gustaría todo aquello, ¡le gustaban tanto las cosas bonitas! Y la pobre tía Tulliver, de la que nadie se ocupaba… se llevaría una sorpresa cuando recibiera una cofia buenísima y el brindis en su honor que Lucy pensaba organizar con su padre aquella tarde. ¡Desde luego, no tenía tiempo que perder recreándose en los sueños sobre sus

felices amoríos! Con estos pensamientos se dirigió hacia la puerta, pero allí se detuvo.

—¿Qué te pasa, *Minny*? —dijo, agachándose en respuesta a los gemidos del pequeño cuadrúpedo; tras alzar la brillante cabeza del perro hasta su rosada mejilla, añadió—: ¿Pensabas que me marchaba sin ti? Ven, vamos a ver a *Simbad*.

Simbad era el caballo zaino de Lucy, al que alimentaba con su propia mano cuando lo sacaban al cercado. Le gustaba dar de comer a los animales dependientes, conocía los gustos de todos los seres de la casa y se deleitaba con el murmullo de los canarios cuando tenían el pico lleno de semillas, al igual que con los pequeños placeres de aquellos animalitos que mordisqueaban la comida y que, a riesgo de parecer demasiado trivial, llamaré aquí los roedores más familiares.

¿Acaso Stephen Guest no acertaba en su decidida opinión al pensar que aquella esbelta doncella de dieciocho años era exactamente el tipo de esposa con la que un hombre no se arrepentiría de haberse casado? Una mujer afectuosa y considerada con otras mujeres, que no les daba besos de judas mientras escudriñaba en busca de bienvenidos defectos, sino que se interesaba realmente por sus sufrimientos semiocultos y disfrutaba proporcionándoles pequeños placeres. Quizá la admiración de Stephen no ponía énfasis en esta poco frecuente cualidad, pues tal vez Stephen aprobaba su elección precisamente porque Lucy no le parecía una rareza. Los hombres desean que las mujeres sean hermosas: bien, Lucy lo era, pero no de modo enloquecedor. Los hombres desean que sus esposas sean damas cumplidas, amables, afectuosas y que no sean tontas: Lucy poseía todas esas cualidades. A Stephen no le sorprendía advertir que estaba enamorado de ella y era consciente de su buen juicio al preferirla a la señorita Leyburn, la hija de un miembro del gobierno local, aunque Lucy era sólo la hija de un socio menor de su padre; además, había tenido que desafiar y vencer la leve renuencia y la decepción de su padre y sus hermanas, circunstancia que da a cualquier joven una agradable conciencia de su dignidad. Stephen sabía que poseía sensatez e independencia suficientes para escoger, sin dejarse influir por consideraciones indirectas, a la mujer que probablemente lo haría feliz.

Había elegido a Lucy de modo plenamente consciente: era una muchacha adorable y exactamente el tipo de mujer que siempre había admirado.

Capítulo II

Primeras impresiones

—Stephen es muy inteligente, Maggie —dijo Lucy. Estaba arrodillada sobre un escabel, a los pies de Maggie, tras colocar a la oscura dama en un sillón de terciopelo carmesí—. Estoy segura de que te gustará. Espero que te guste.

—Difícilmente me daré por satisfecha —contestó Maggie, sonriendo y tomando uno de los largos tirabuzones de Lucy para que los rayos de sol pasaran a través del cabello—. Un caballero que se considera lo bastante bueno para Lucy debe esperar duras críticas.

—Te aseguro que es demasiado bueno para mí. Y algunas veces, cuando está lejos, estoy tentada de creer que no es posible que me quiera. Pero cuando está conmigo nunca lo dudo, aunque no soportaría que nadie, excepto tú, supiera lo que siento, Maggie.

—Entonces, si no le doy mi aprobación, podrás dejarlo, puesto que no estáis comprometidos —bromeó Maggie con aire grave.

—Prefiero no estar comprometida: cuando llega el compromiso todos piensan en casarse pronto —confesó Lucy, demasiado preocupada para prestar atención a la broma de Maggie—, y a mí me gustaría que las cosas se quedaran como están durante mucho tiempo. Algunas veces me asusta la idea de que Stephen me diga que ha hablado con papá y, por algo que papá dijo el otro día, estoy segura de que él y el señor Guest están esperándolo. Y ahora las hermanas de Stephen se comportan conmigo con mucha cortesía: me parece que al principio no les gustaba que Stephen me hiciera caso; y

era natural. Parece fuera de lugar que me vaya a vivir a un lugar enorme como Park House, yo que soy tan poca cosa.

—No se supone que el tamaño de las personas deba guardar proporción con las casas que habitan, como sucede con los caracoles —dijo Maggie entre risas—. Dime, ¿las hermanas de Stephen son gigantas?

—Oh, no. Ni tampoco guapas; bueno, no mucho —dijo Lucy, un poco arrepentida de aquella observación tan poco caritativa—. Pero él sí loes; por lo menos, todos lo consideran muy apuesto.

—¿Aunque tú seas incapaz de compartir esa opinión?

—¡Oh, no sé! —dijo Lucy, sonrojándose del cuello a la frente—. No es bueno despertar demasiadas expectativas; quizá te sientas decepcionada. Pero le he preparado una sorpresa encantadora y me reiré mucho de él, aunque no pienso contarte en qué consiste.

Lucy se levantó y se alejó un poco con la bonita cabeza ladeada, como si hubiera estado arreglando a Maggie para un retrato y deseara juzgar el efecto general.

—Levántate un momento, Maggie.

—¿Qué quieres hacer ahora? —preguntó Maggie, sonriendo lánguidamente mientras se levantaba de la butaca y miraba desde su alta estatura a su prima menuda y aérea, cuya figura quedaba subordinada a sus impecables ropajes de seda y crespón.

Lucy la contempló unos momentos en silencio.

—Maggie, no sé qué clase de hechizo posees para que te siente mejor la ropa vieja; de todas maneras, necesitas un vestido nuevo. Pero ayer intentaba imaginarte con un traje hermoso y a la moda y, por muchas vueltas que le daba, el viejo vestido lacio de lana merino regresaba como lo único adecuado para ti. Me pregunto si María Antonieta también tenía un aspecto magnífico cuando llevaba un vestido zurcido en los codos. En cambio, si yo me pusiera un traje ajado, resultaría muy insignificante, un pingajo.

—Claro, claro —contestó Maggie con burlona seriedad—. Correrías el riesgo de que te barrieran de la habitación, junto con las telas de araña y el polvo de la alfombra, y de encontrarte en el hogar, como Cenicienta. ¿Puedo sentarme ya?

—Sí, ya puedes —dijo Lucy riendo. Después, con aire de seriedad, se desprendió un gran broche de azabache—. Pero debemos cambiar los broches, Maggie; esa pequeña mariposa no resulta apropiada para ti.

—Pero ¿no estropeará el efecto encantador de mi pobreza? —preguntó Maggie, sentándose obedientemente mientras Lucy se arrodillaba otra vez y le quitaba la despreciable mariposa—. Desearía que mi madre pensara lo mismo que tú, porque anoche estaba muy inquieta porque éste es mi mejor traje. He estado ahorrando dinero para pagar algunas clases: nunca tendré un empleo mejor si no hago más méritos.

Maggie lanzó un pequeño suspiro.

—Vamos, no pongas otra vez esa cara tan triste —dijo Lucy, prendiendo el gran broche bajo la hermosa garganta de Maggie—. Olvidas que has salido de esa horrible escuela y ya no tienes que remendar la ropa de las niñas.

—Sí —reconoció Maggie—, no me la quito de encima. Me siento como un pobre oso blanco que vi una vez en un espectáculo. Me pareció que la costumbre de dar vueltas una y otra vez estaba tan arraigada en él que seguiría haciéndolo aunque lo soltaran. La de ser desgraciado es una mala costumbre.

—Pero voy a someterte a una disciplina de placer que te hará perder esa mala costumbre —dijo Lucy, prendiéndose distraídamente la mariposa negra en el cuello del vestido mientras sus ojos miraban los de Maggie con afecto.

—¡Eres un encanto! —exclamó Maggie, en uno de sus estallidos de admiración cariñosa—. Tengo la sensación de que disfrutas tanto con la felicidad de los demás que podrías prescindir de la tuya propia. Me gustaría ser como tú.

—Nunca he tenido que pasar por pruebas muy duras —contestó Lucy —. Siempre he sido muy feliz. No sé si podría soportar muchas penas, porque no he conocido otra que la muerte de mi pobre madre. En cambio, tú sí; y estoy segura de que sientes por los demás lo mismo que yo.

—No, Lucy —dijo Maggie, negando lentamente con la cabeza—. No disfruto como tú de la felicidad ajena; sentiría más satisfacciones si así fuera. Lamento que los demás pasen apuros y creo que no sería capaz de

hacer desgraciada a otra persona, y, sin embargo, con frecuencia me odio porque me enfurece contemplar la felicidad de los demás. Creo que empeoro a medida que crezco, me hago más egoísta. Eso me parece horrible.

—¡Vamos, Maggie! —la reprendió Lucy—. No me creo nada de lo que me cuentas. Sólo son fantasías pesimistas porque esa vida triste y tediosa te ha deprimido.

—Bien, quizá sea eso —dijo Maggie, apartando las nubes de su rostro con una radiante sonrisa al tiempo que se recostaba en el sillón—. Tal vez se deba a la dieta del colegio: budín de arroz aguado sazonado con Pinnock. Esperemos que desaparezca ante las cremas que prepara mi madre y este encantador *Geoffrey Crayon*[30].

Maggie cogió el *Libro de apuntes* que se encontraba sobre la mesa, a su lado.

—¿Qué tal me queda este brochecito? —preguntó Lucy, encaminándose hacia el espejo de la chimenea para comprobar el efecto.

—Muy mal, el señor Guest tendrá que salir de la sala en cuanto te vea con él. Date prisa y ponte otro.

Lucy salió de la habitación a toda prisa, pero Maggie no aprovechó la oportunidad para abrir el libro: lo dejó caer sobre el regazo y dejó vagar los ojos hacia la ventana, por los macizos de flores primaverales y el largo seto de laureles bañados por el sol; más allá, se extendía el plateado Floss, el viejo y querido río que a aquella distancia parecía dormitar en una mañana festiva. El aroma dulce y fresco del jardín entraba por la ventana abierta y los pájaros se entretenían en revolotear, posarse, gorjear y cantar. Sin embargo, los ojos de Maggie se llenaron de lágrimas. La visión de los viejos lugares le hacía evocar recuerdos tan dolorosos que incluso la víspera apenas había conseguido otra cosa que alegrarse de que su madre volviera a vivir con comodidades y de la fraternal amabilidad de Tom, de la misma manera que nos alegramos de que a algún amigo lejano le vayan bien las cosas, pero no compartimos su felicidad. La memoria y la imaginación le imponían una sensación de privación demasiado intensa para degustar lo que le ofrecía el efímero presente. Intuía que el futuro sería peor que el pasado, porque tras varios años de renuncia voluntaria, había vuelto a sentir

anhelos y deseos: los días desdichados de ocupaciones desagradables le resultaban cada vez más duros, y las imágenes de la vida variada e intensa que ansiaba resultaban cada vez más persistentes. El ruido de la puerta la despertó de sus ensoñaciones y, secándose rápidamente las lágrimas, empezó a pasar las hojas del libro.

—Maggie: sé de un placer al que no puedes resistirte ni cuando estás más triste —dijo Lucy, lanzándose a hablar en cuanto entró en la sala—: la música. Y tengo intención de que disfrutes de ella en abundancia. Quiero que vuelvas a prepararte para tocar el piano, cosa que hacías mucho mejor que yo cuando estábamos en Laceham.

—Te habrías reído si me hubieras visto tocar canciones infantiles una y otra vez para las niñas pequeñas cuando les daba clase por el mero placer de tocar de nuevo las teclas —dijo Maggie—. Pero no sé si ahora seré capaz de tocar algo más difícil que una canción popular como *Begone, dull care*.

—Recuerdo lo muchísimo que disfrutabas cuando venían los del coro a cantar —dijo Lucy, tomando su bordado—. Podríamos deleitarnos con esas canciones que tanto te gustaban, siempre que no pienses lo mismo que Tom sobre ciertas cosas.

—Creía que estabas segura de ello —contestó Maggie con una sonrisa.

—Debería haber dicho: sobre un asunto en concreto. Porque si piensas lo mismo que él, perderemos la tercera voz. En Saint Ogg's hay poquísimos caballeros que canten: en realidad, sólo Stephen y Philip Wakem tienen suficientes conocimientos de música para leer una partitura.

Tras decir esta última frase, Lucy alzó la vista de la labor y observó un cambio en el rostro de Maggie.

—¿Te duele oír ese apellido, Maggie? Si es así, no volveré a hablar de él. Ya sé que Tom no quiere ni verlo, si puede evitarlo.

—No pienso lo mismo que Tom sobre esta cuestión —dijo Maggie, poniéndose en pie y dirigiéndose hacia la ventana, como si quisiera contemplar mejor el paisaje—. Siempre he apreciado a Philip Wakem, desde que lo conocí en Lorton cuando era pequeña. Fue muy bueno cuando Tom se hirió en el pie.

—¡Oh, cuánto me alegro! —exclamó Lucy—. Entonces, no te importará que venga algunas veces; con él podremos ampliar nuestro repertorio

musical. Aprecio mucho al pobre Philip, aunque me gustaría que no diera a su enfermedad una importancia que me parece enfermiza. Supongo que por su culpa es un hombre tan triste y, algunas veces, incluso amargo. Sin duda, da pena ver ese pobre cuerpo jorobado y esa cara tan pálida entre personas grandes y fuertes.

—Pero Lucy… dijo Maggie, intentando detener aquel parloteo.

—Ah, llaman a la puerta, debe de ser Stephen —añadió Lucy sin advertir el débil esfuerzo de Maggie por hablar—. Una de las cosas que más admiro de Stephen es que Philip encuentra en él al mejor amigo.

Era ya demasiado tarde para que Maggie pudiera intervenir: se abrió la puerta del salón y *Minny* gruñó un poco mientras entraba un caballero alto que se dirigió hacia Lucy y le tomó la mano con una mirada a medias cortés y a medias de tierna interrogación que parecía indicar que no había advertido la presencia de nadie más.

—Permita que le presente a mi prima, la señorita Tulliver —dijo Lucy, volviéndose con traviesa diversión hacia Maggie, que se acercaba ahora de la alejada ventana—: el señor Stephen Guest.

Durante unos instantes, Stephen no pudo ocultar su asombro al ver aquella alta ninfa de ojos negros y corona de cabello azabache. Maggie sintió que, por primera vez en su vida, recibía el homenaje de un profundo rubor y una marcada reverencia por parte de una persona ante la que ella también se sentía tímida. Esta nueva experiencia le pareció muy agradable, tanto que casi borró la emoción anterior provocada por Philip. Cuando se sentó, los ojos le brillaban y tenía las mejillas sonrojadas de modo muy atractivo.

—Espero que advierta la sorprendente semejanza con el original que guarda el retrato que hizo ayer —se burló Lucy con una carcajada de triunfo, encantada ante la confusión de su enamorado: normalmente, era él quien se encontraba en situación de ventaja.

—Esta intrigante prima suya me ha engañado por completo, señorita Tulliver —explicó Stephen, sentándose junto a Lucy y dejando de jugar con *Minny* mientras lanzaba a Maggie una mirada furtiva—. Me dijo que tenía usted el cabello claro y los ojos azules.

—¡Qué va! Fue usted quien lo dijo —protestó Lucy—: yo sólo me abstuve de destruir su confianza en su clarividencia.

—Desearía equivocarme siempre así —declaró Stephen— y encontrarme con que la realidad es mucho mejor que mis ideas preconcebidas.

—En cambio, ahora se ha mostrado a la altura de las circunstancias y ha dicho la frase oportuna —intervino Maggie, lanzándole una mirada de desafío: resultaba evidente que había hecho de ella un retrato satírico. Lucy le había contado que era aficionado a ello y Maggie añadió mentalmente: «Y bastante engreíd».

«Una mujer endiablad», fue lo primero que pensó Stephen. Lo segundo, cuando Maggie se inclinó de nuevo sobre la labor, fue: «Ojalá me mire otra ve». El tercer pensamiento fue para contestar:

—Las frases de mera cortesía son sinceras en algunas ocasiones. Cuando un hombre dice «gracia», algunas veces está agradecido. Aunque no es justo que deba emplear la misma palabra que utiliza todo el mundo para rechazar una invitación desagradable, ¿no le parece, señorita Tulliver?

—No —contestó Maggie, lanzándole una de sus miradas directas—. En las grandes ocasiones, las palabras sencillas tienen mayor fuerza, porque se advierte de inmediato que tienen un sentido especial, como los viejos estandartes o los ropajes cotidianos colgados en lugares sagrados.

—Entonces, mi cumplido debía de ser elocuente —dijo Stephen, sin saber muy bien qué decía mientras Maggie lo miraba—, puesto que mis palabras quedaban tan lejos de estar a la altura de la ocasión.

—Ningún cumplido es elocuente, excepto como expresión de indiferencia —repuso Maggie, sonrojándose un poco.

Lucy empezó a alarmarse ante la idea de que Stephen y Maggie no fueran a congeniar. Siempre había temido que Maggie pareciera demasiado inteligente y original para agradar a aquel caballero tan crítico.

—Pero, querida Maggie —intervino Lucy—, siempre has dicho que te gusta en exceso la admiración de los demás, y ahora me parece que te enfadas porque alguien te muestra admiración.

—En absoluto —contestó Maggie—; me gusta muchísimo advertir la admiración ajena, pero las fórmulas de cumplido no me hacen sentir nada.

—Entonces, no volveré a dirigirle ninguno, señorita Tulliver —dijo Stephen.

—Gracias, eso será una muestra de respeto.

¡Pobre Maggie! Estaba tan poco habituada a la vida social que era incapaz de pasar por alto las meras fórmulas; como, además, no estaba acostumbrada a la charla superficial, el exceso de pasión que ponía en los incidentes más triviales resultaba absurdo para las damas más expertas. Sin embargo, en este momento era consciente del lado ridículo de la conversación. Era cierto que sentía un rechazo teórico hacia las fórmulas de cumplido y, en una ocasión, había dicho a Philip con enfado que tan tonto era decir a las mujeres con boba sonrisa que eran hermosas como a los ancianos que eran venerables: con todo, no era razonable irritarse porque un desconocido como el señor Guest utilizara una fórmula habitual o hubiera hablado de ella de modo desdeñoso antes de verla, de modo que en cuanto se calló empezó a avergonzarse. No se le ocurrió que su irritación se debía a la agradable emoción que la había precedido, de la misma manera que cuando nos sentimos cálidamente arropados una inocente gota de agua fría nos sobresalta.

Stephen estaba demasiado bien educado para no advertir el sesgo incómodo de la conversación, de modo que pasó de inmediato a hablar de asuntos impersonales y a preguntar a Lucy si sabía cuándo iba a tener lugar por fin la venta de beneficencia, con la esperanza de ver cómo dirigía los ojos hacia objetos más agradecidos que las flores de estambre que crecían bajo sus dedos.

—Creo que algún día del mes que viene —contestó Lucy—, pero sus hermanas trabajan mucho más que yo: tendrán el puesto más grande.

—Ah, sí, pero realizan sus manufacturas en su salón, donde yo no las importuno. Observo que usted no es adicta al vicio de moda del bordado, señorita Tulliver —dijo Stephen, viendo que Maggie cosía un sencillo dobladillo.

—No —contestó Maggie—, no soy capaz de hacer nada más difícil o elegante que una camisa.

—Y tus puntadas son tan bonitas, Maggie —señaló Lucy—, que creo que te rogaré que me des unas cuantas piezas para mostrarlas como

bordado. Tu exquisito modo de coser es un misterio para mí: en otros tiempos te disgustaba este tipo de trabajo.

—El misterio tiene explicación —dijo Maggie, alzando la vista con serenidad—. Puesto que era la única manera de conseguir dinero, tuve que esforzarme en aprender a coser bien.

La buena y simple de Lucy no pudo evitar sonrojarse un poco: no le gustaba que Stephen lo supiera y Maggie no debía haberlo mencionado. Quizá aquella confesión fuera un gesto de orgullo: el orgullo de una pobreza que no quiere avergonzarse de sí misma. Sin embargo, aunque Maggie hubiera sido la reina de las coquetas, difícilmente podría haber inventado mejor modo de hacer más interesante su belleza a los ojos de Stephen: tal vez el reconocimiento de que cosía prendas de ropa y era pobre no hubieran bastado, pero ese hecho, sumado a su belleza, hacía de Maggie una mujer todavía más singular.

—Pero si es de alguna utilidad para vuestra venta benéfica, puedo hacer punto de media —prosiguió Maggie.

—Oh, sí, es muy útil. Mañana te daré lana escarlata. Por cierto —dijo Lucy, volviéndose hacia Stephen—, su hermana tiene un talento envidiable para modelar: está haciendo un busto asombroso del doctor Kenn, totalmente de memoria.

—Caramba, si se acuerda de ponerle los ojos muy juntos y las comisuras de los labios muy separadas, seguro que en Saint Ogg's todos le encuentran un parecido sorprendente.

—Es usted muy malo —protestó Lucy con aspecto ofendido—. Nunca habría pensado que pudiera usted hablar del doctor Kenn con tan poco respeto.

—¿He dicho algo irrespetuoso? ¡Dios no lo quiera! Pero no estoy obligado a respetar un busto suyo injurioso. Creo que Kenn es uno de los mejores hombres de este mundo. Me da igual que haya puesto esos altos candelabros sobre la mesa de la comunión, y no quisiera estropear mi buen humor levantándome temprano para rezar. Pero es el único hombre que he conocido que parece poseer algún rasgo de un verdadero apóstol: un hombre que gana ochocientos al año y se contenta con muebles de pino y vaca hervida porque regala dos tercios de sus ingresos. Fue un gesto

hermoso por su parte acoger en su casa al pobre chico aquel, Grattan, que mató a su madre de un disparo accidental. Le dedica más tiempo del que tendrían hombres menos ocupados para evitar que enloquezca y, por lo que veo, lleva al muchacho a todas partes.

—Eso está muy bien —dijo Maggie, que había dejado caer la labor y escuchaba con vivo interés—. Nunca conocí a nadie que hiciera cosas como ésas.

—Y este tipo de acciones son tanto más admirables cuanto que sus modales, en general, son fríos y severos —añadió Stephen—. No hay en él nada meloso o sensiblero.

—¡Oh, a mí me parece una persona estupenda! —exclamó Lucy con entusiasmo.

—No, en eso no puedo estar de acuerdo con usted —dijo Stephen con sarcástica gravedad.

—Entonces, ¿qué defecto le encuentra?

—Que es anglicano.

—Bueno, pues a mí me parece que ésa es la opción adecuada —dijo Lucy muy seria.

—En teoría, así es —explicó Stephen—, pero no desde un punto de vista parlamentario. Ha sembrado la discordia entre los disidentes y los seguidores de la Iglesia de Inglaterra, y a un futuro diputado como yo, cuyos servicios tanto necesita el país, le resultará molesto que se presente candidato al honor de representar a Saint Ogg's en el Parlamento.

—¿De veras piensa usted presentarse? —preguntó Lucy con los ojos brillantes de un orgulloso placer que hizo que se desinteresara por el anglicanismo.

—Sin duda, cuando el espíritu de servicio público del viejo señor Leyburn y su gota lo empujen a ceder el paso a los demás. Mi padre pone en ello todas sus ilusiones. Y deben ustedes saber que dones como los míos suponen una gran responsabilidad —Stephen se levantó y, bromeando, se pasó las grandes manos blancas por el cabello con un gesto vanidoso—. ¿No lo cree usted así, señorita Tulliver?

—Sí —contestó Maggie sonriendo, sin levantar la vista—: tanta fluidez de palabra y serenidad no deben desperdiciarse en privado.

—Ah, advierto que es usted una mujer muy perspicaz —dijo Stephen—. Ha descubierto ya que soy charlatán y descarado. Las personas superficiales nunca lo advierten; tal vez debido a mis modales, imagino.

«No me mira cuando hablo de mí mismo —pensó mientras sus oyentes se reían—. Debo intentar otros tema».

De modo que preguntó si Lucy tenía intención de asistir la semana siguiente a la reunión del Club del libro. A continuación le recomendó que escogiera la Vida *de Cowper*, de Southey, a menos que se sintiera inclinada a la filosofía y quisieran sobresaltar a las damas de Saint Ogg's votando por uno de los tratados de Bridgewater. Naturalmente, Lucy quiso saber en qué consistían esos libros alarmantemente eruditos y, puesto que siempre resulta agradable elevar el nivel de conocimientos de las damas hablándoles familiarmente de temas que ignoran por completo, Stephen se mostró brillante gracias al tratado de Buckland que acababa de leer. Como recompensa, Maggie dejó caer la labor y fue quedándose tan absorta en aquella maravillosa historia geológica que permaneció sentada mirándolo, inclinada hacia delante con los brazos cruzados y olvidada de sí misma, como si él fuera el más aficionado al rapé de los viejos profesores y ella un alumno que ya luciera bozo. Stephen estaba tan fascinado por aquella mirada amplia y clara que terminó por olvidarse de mirar de vez en cuando a Lucy: pero la dulce muchacha sólo se alegraba de que Stephen demostrara ante Maggie lo listísimo que era y de que terminaran siendo buenos amigos.

—Si así lo desea, puedo traerle el libro, señorita Tulliver —dijo Stephen cuando menguó el caudal de sus recuerdos—. Contiene muchas ilustraciones que tal vez le gustaría ver.

—Muchas gracias —contestó Maggie. Esta pregunta directa hizo que se sonrojara, volviera en sí y retomara la labor.

—No, no —intervino Lucy—. Debo prohibirle que zambulla a Maggie en los libros otra vez: no conseguiría sacarla de allí. Y quiero que pase unos días deliciosos de descanso, llenos de charlas y paseos en bote, a caballo y en carruaje.

—¡A propósito! —exclamó Stephen, mirando el reloj—. ¿Vamos al río a remar un rato? La marea nos permitirá ir hacia Tofton y podemos volver andando.

A Maggie le encantó la propuesta, porque hacía años que no iba al río. Cuando ésta se marchó para ponerse la capota, Lucy se entretuvo para dar una orden a la criada y aprovechó la oportunidad para decir a Stephen que Maggie no se oponía, a ver a Philip, de modo que era una pena que hubiera enviado esa nota la antevíspera; así que escribiría otra al día siguiente invitándolo.

—Puedo pasar mañana por su casa, convencerlo y traerlo conmigo por la tarde —sugirió Stephen—. Mis hermanas querrán venir de visita en cuanto les diga que su prima está aquí. Debo dejarles el campo libre por la mañana.

—Oh, sí, por favor, tráigalo —rogó Lucy—. ¿Verdad que va usted a apreciar a Maggie? —añadió en tono implorante—. ¿No es cierto que es una persona encantadora y de noble aspecto?

—Demasiado alta —dijo Stephen, agachando la cabeza para dirigirle una sonrisa—. Y demasiado vehemente: ya sabe usted que no es el tipo de mujer que me gusta.

Bien sabes, lector, que los caballeros tienden a hacer imprudentes confidencias negativas a las damas sobre otras mujeres más hermosas que ellas. Así es como muchas mujeres disfrutan con el conocimiento de que las damas hermosas disgustan en secreto a los hombres que se han sacrificado cortejándolas apasionadamente. Pocas cosas podrían definir mejor a Lucy que el hecho de que creyera a pies juntillas lo que había dicho Stephen y tomara la firme decisión de que Maggie no se enterara. Pero tú, lector, que te guías por una lógica superior a la verbal, habrás deducido de la desfavorable opinión de Stephen que cuando éste se encaminó hacia el cobertizo del embarcadero iba calculando, con ayuda de una fértil imaginación, que, como consecuencia de aquel agradable plan, Maggie debería darle la mano por lo menos en dos ocasiones, y que un caballero que desea que lo observen las damas está muy bien situado cuando rema para ellas en un bote. ¿Y qué quería decir aquello? ¿Se había enamorado súbitamente de la sorprendente hija de la señora Tulliver? Claro que no: en la vida real no existen estas pasiones. Además, estaba ya enamorado y casi comprometido con la más adorable muchacha del mundo, y no era hombre dado a hacer el ridículo. Sin embargo, cuando se tienen veinticinco años, la

gota no debilita todavía el sentido del tacto y el contacto con una muchacha hermosa no deja indiferente. Era algo perfectamente natural e inofensivo admirar la belleza y disfrutar de su contemplación, por lo menos en circunstancias como aquéllas. Y aquella muchacha, con su pobreza y sus problemas, resultaba muy interesante: era agradable contemplar la amistad entre las dos primas. Stephen reconocía que, por lo general, no le gustaban las mujeres de carácter acusado, pero en aquel caso la peculiaridad parecía ser de naturaleza superior: y siempre que uno no esté obligado a casarse con mujeres como ésas, lo cierto es que dan amenidad a las relaciones sociales.

Durante el primer cuarto de hora, Maggie no satisfizo las esperanzas de Stephen y no lo miró: los ojos se le llenaban con la imagen de las antiguas riberas que tan bien conocía. Se sentía sola, alejada de Philip, la única persona que la había querido con devoción, tal como siempre había deseado que la amaran. Pero al cabo de un rato atrajo su atención el rítmico movimiento de los remos y pensó que le gustaría aprender a remar. Eso la despertó de sus sueños y preguntó si podría tomar un remo. Le pareció que aquello requería grandes enseñanzas y se sintió ambiciosa; el ejercicio le coloreó las mejillas y la empujó a aplicarse con alegría a la lección.

—No me daré por satisfecha hasta que sepa manejar ambos remos y pueda llevarlos de paseo a los dos —dijo con aire radiante cuando bajó del bote. Bien sabemos que Maggie tenía tendencia a distraerse y escogió un momento inoportuno para la observación: le resbaló el pie, pero afortunadamente Stephen Guest le tomó la mano con fuerza y la sostuvo.

—¿Se ha hecho usted daño? —preguntó Stephen, inclinándose para mirarla con inquietud. Resultaba muy agradable que alguien más alto y más fuerte se ocupara de ella con tanta amabilidad. Maggie nunca había sentido una sensación parecida.

Cuando regresaron a la casa, encontraron al tío y a la tía Pullet sentados con la señora Tulliver en el salón, y Stephen se marchó apresuradamente tras pedir autorización para regresar por la tarde.

—Le ruego que traiga de nuevo el libro de las partituras de Purcell que se llevó —dijo Lucy—. Quiero que Maggie de oiga cantar las mejores canciones.

La tía Pullet, convencida de que Maggie recibiría invitaciones para acompañar a Lucy, probablemente a Park House, se escandalizó ante la pobreza de su vestimenta, ya que cuando la contemplara da alta sociedad de Saint Ogg's supondría un desprestigio para toda la familia. Aquello exigía una solución rápida y contundente; y tanto Lucy como la señora Tulliver se lanzaron a debatir sobre lo que sería más adecuado para tal fin entre los excedentes del guardarropa de la señora Pullet. Maggie debía contar con un traje de noche lo antes posible y su estatura era similar a la de la tía Pullet.

—Pero es mucho más ancha de hombros que yo, no le quedará bien —dijo la señora Pullet—. En otro caso, podría haber llevado ese hermoso traje de brocado negro sin retocarlo. Y mirad qué brazos —añadió la tía Pullet entristecida mientras alzaba el largo y bien torneado brazo de Maggie—. Imposible que le quepan mis mangas.

—Eso no importa, tía. Denos el vestido, por favor —dijo Lucy—. Maggie no tiene por qué llevar manga larga y tengo mucho encaje negro para ribetearlas. Lucirá unos brazos preciosos.

—Es que los brazos de Maggie son muy bonitos —intervino la señora Tulliver—. Así eran los míos; aunque no tan morenos. Me gustaría que tuviera una piel como la de nuestra familia.

—¡No diga bobadas, tía! —dijo Lucy, dando palmaditas a su tía en el hombro—. Usted no entiende de estas cosas. Cualquier pintor de diría que la tez de Maggie es hermosa.

—Tal vez, querida —contestó da señora Tulliver con sumisión—. Tú sabes más que yo, pero cuando yo era joven la piel oscura no gustaba entre las personas respetables.

—No —contestó el tío Pullet, que se interesaba profundamente en la conversación de las damas mientras chupaba caramelos—. Aunque había una canción sobre una muchacha oscura titulada *Nutbrown Maid*. Decía algo de la loca Kate, pero no lo recuerdo bien.

—¡Vamos, vamos! —exclamó Maggie con una carcajada impaciente. Si siguen hablando tanto de mi piel morena acabará por desaparecer.

Capítulo III

Confidencias

Aquella noche, cuando Maggie subió a su dormitorio no pareció tener deseos de desvestirse. Depositó la vela en la primera mesilla que encontró y empezó a recorrer la gran habitación de un lado a otro con paso firme, regular y rápido, muestra de que el ejercicio era una vía de escape instintiva para una gran agitación. Los ojos y las mejillas le brillaban de modo casi febril; tenía la cabeza hacia atrás, las manos entrelazadas con las palmas hacia delante y los brazos extendidos y tensos, gestos que suelen acompañar a los momentos de gran concentración.

¿Acaso había sucedido algo importante?

Nada que el lector pudiera considerar relevante. Había estado escuchando música hermosa cantada por una bonita voz de bajo, si bien con un estilo de aficionado de provincias que habría dejado mucho que desear al oído crítico del lector. Y era consciente de que la habían observado de modo furtivo y frecuente desde debajo de un par de cejas negras y definidas, con una mirada que parecía advertir la influencia de la voz. Tales cosas no habrían causado efecto perceptible en una dama bien educada y muy equilibrada que hubiera disfrutado siempre de los privilegios de la fortuna, la formación y el refinado trato social. Pero si Maggie hubiera sido esa joven dama, probablemente poco habría sabido de ella el lector; su vida habría tenido tan pocas vicisitudes que difícilmente podría haberse escrito sobre ella; porque las mujeres más felices, como las más felices naciones, carecen de historia[31].

En la naturaleza hambrienta y tensa de Maggie, que acababa de salir de un colegio de tercera clase, con todos sus sonidos discordantes y tareas mezquinas, estas causas aparentemente triviales habían tenido el efecto de enardecer y exaltar su imaginación de modo misterioso incluso para sí misma. No es que pensara mucho en Stephen Guest o se recreara en los indicios de que la miraba con admiración, sino que presentía la remota presencia de un mundo de amor, belleza y placer, construido con imágenes vagas y entremezcladas, procedentes de toda la poesía y la novela amorosa que había leído o había tejido en sus ensoñaciones. En una o dos ocasiones, evocó fugazmente la época en que se recreaba en las privaciones, cuando creía que había dominado los deseos e impaciencias, pero aquel tiempo parecía irremediablemente pasado y ni siquiera deseaba recordarlo. Ninguna oración ni ningún esfuerzo le devolvería ahora aquella paz negativa; al parecer, la batalla de su vida no se decidiría de aquel modo tan breve y sencillo: con la absoluta renuncia en el mismo umbral de la juventud. La música seguía vibrando en ella —la música de Purcell, con su poderosa pasión y fantasía— y no podía demorarse en el recuerdo de aquel tiempo pasado desnudo y solitario. Se encontraba de nuevo entre las nubes cuando se oyó un suave golpe en la puerta: naturalmente, era su prima, que entró vestida con una amplia bata.

—Vamos, Maggie, niña mala, ¿todavía no has empezado a desvestirte? —preguntó Lucy, asombrada—. Me prometí no venir a hablar contigo porque pensaba que estarías cansada. Pero aquí estás, como si fueras a vestirte para ir a un baile. Vamos, vamos, cámbiate y destrénzate el cabello.

—Bueno, tú tampoco has hecho mucho —repuso Maggie, cogiendo rápidamente la bata rosa y mirando el cabello castaño claro de Lucy, echado hacia atrás con los rizos en desorden.

—Oh, no tengo mucho que hacer. Me sentaré y hablaré contigo hasta que vea que vas a meterte en la cama.

Mientras Maggie estaba de pie y deshacía las largas trenzas sobre la tela rosa, Lucy permaneció sentada cerca del aguamanil, mirándola con ojos afectuosos y la cabeza un poco ladeada, como un lindo spaniel. Si te parece increíble, lector, que dos jóvenes damas se sientan inclinadas a las

confidencias en una situación como ésa, te ruego que recuerdes que la vida humana proporciona muchos casos excepcionales.

—Has disfrutado mucho con la música, ¿verdad, Maggie?

—Sí, eso es lo que me ha quitado el sueño. Creo que si siempre pudiera escuchar música no tendría otro deseo en este mundo. Tengo la sensación de que me llena el cuerpo de fuerza y la cabeza de ideas. La vida parece pasar sin esfuerzo cuando estoy llena de música. En otras ocasiones, uno es consciente de acarrear una carga.

—Y Stephen tiene una voz espléndida, ¿verdad?

—Bueno, quizá no seamos jueces adecuados —dijo Maggie riendo mientras se sentaba y se echaba el pelo hacia atrás—. Tú no eres imparcial y a mí cualquier organillo me parece espléndido.

—Cuéntame lo que piensas de él: dímelo todo, lo bueno y lo malo.

—Oh, creo que deberías bajarle un poco los humos. Un enamorado no debería mostrarse tan tranquilo y seguro. Debería estar un poco más tembloroso.

—¡Tonterías, Maggie! ¡Como si yo fuera capaz de hacer temblar a nadie! Te parece un poco engreído, ya me doy cuenta. Pero no te disgusta, ¿verdad?

—¡Disgustarme! ¡Claro que no! ¿Acaso tengo tanta costumbre de ver gente encantadora que resulto difícil de contentar? Además, ¡cómo iba a disgustarme nadie que hubiera prometido hacerte feliz, querida prima! —exclamó Maggie, pellizcando suavemente la barbilla con hoyuelo de Lucy.

—Mañana por la tarde tendremos más música —dijo Lucy, feliz—, ya que Stephen traerá consigo a Philip Wakem.

—Oh, Lucy, no puedo verlo —contestó Maggie, palideciendo—. Por lo menos, no puedo verlo sin permiso de Tom.

—¿Tan tiránico es Tom? —preguntó Lucy, sorprendida—. Me hago responsable: le diré que ha sido culpa mía.

—Pero, querida Lucy —contestó Maggie, vacilando—. Se lo prometí a Tom solemnemente, antes de que muriera mi padre. Le prometí que no hablaría con Philip sin su conocimiento y consentimiento. Y me da mucho miedo volver a mencionar el tema ante él y que volvamos a pelearnos.

—En mi vida he oído hablar de nada tan raro y poco razonable. ¿Qué daño puede haber causado el pobre Philip? ¿Puedo hablar con Tom de esto?

—Oh, no, por favor, Lucy —le rogó Maggie—. Mañana mismo iré a verlo y le diré que tú quieres que Philip venga. Ya había pensado en pedirle que me liberara de mi promesa, pero nunca tuve valor suficiente para decidirme a hacerlo.

—Maggie —dijo Lucy tras un silencio—: tienes secretos para mí y yo, en cambio, no te oculto nada.

Maggie apartó la vista de Lucy con aire pensativo. Finalmente se volvió hacia ella.

—Me gustaría contarte lo de Philip, pero no puedes decírselo a nadie y mucho menos a él o al señor Guest.

La narración duró mucho rato, ya que Maggie nunca había conocido el alivio de semejante desahogo. Nunca había contado a Lucy nada de su vida más íntima, y el dulce rostro inclinado hacia ella con interés y comprensión, y la manita que estrechaba la suya la animaba a seguir hablando. Sin embargo, no dio muchos detalles sobre dos aspectos: no reveló por completo lo que todavía le dolía como la mayor ofensa de Tom —los insultos que había vertido sobre Philip: como aquel recuerdo todavía la enfadaba, no podía soportar compartirlo con nadie, tanto por Tom como por Philip— y tampoco fue capaz de contar a Lucy la última escena entre su padre y Wakem, aunque sentía que era una nueva barrera entre ella y Philip. Se limitó a explicar a Lucy que ahora se daba cuenta de que Tom tenía todo el derecho a considerar que el amor y el matrimonio entre ella y Philip eran imposibles debido a la relación de las dos familias. Sin duda, el padre de Philip nunca lo aprobaría.

—Bien, Lucy. Ahora conoces mi historia —dijo Maggie, sonriendo con lágrimas en los ojos. Ya ves que soy como *sir* Andrew Ague-cheek: en una ocasión me adoraron[32].

—Ah, ahora entiendo que conozcas a Shakespeare y tantas otras cosas, y que hayas aprendido tanto desde que dejaste el colegio: me parecía cosa de brujería, parte de tu misterio —dijo Lucy. Tras meditar un instante con los ojos bajos, añadió, mirándola—. Es muy hermoso que ames a Philip, nunca pensé que pudiera llegarle semejante felicidad. Y creo que no

deberías renunciar a él: ahora hay obstáculos, pero con el tiempo pueden eliminarse.

Maggie negó con la cabeza.

—Sí, sí —insistió Lucy—. No puedo remediar ser optimista. Es una historia romántica, poco común, como debería ser todo lo que te sucediera. Y Philip te adorará como un marido de cuento de hadas. Intentaré darle vueltas en mi cabecita para inventar algún plan que haga entrar en razón a todo el mundo, de modo que puedas casarte con Philip cuando yo me case… con otra persona. ¿No sería un bonito final para todas las penas de mi pobrecita Maggie?

Maggie intentó sonreír, pero se estremeció como con un escalofrío repentino.

—Querida Maggie, tienes frío —dijo Lucy—. Debes meterte en la cama y yo también. No me atrevo ni a pensar en la hora que será.

Se despidieron con un beso y Lucy se marchó con una seguridad que tendría gran influencia sobre sus impresiones posteriores. Maggie había sido totalmente sincera: a su carácter le resultaba difícil ser de otro modo. Pero, incluso cuando son sinceras, muchas confidencias no hacen más que cegar.

Capítulo IV

Hermano y hermana

Para encontrar a Tom en casa, Maggie se vio obligada a ir a su alojamiento durante el día, a la hora de comer. No se hospedaba con desconocidos. Con el consentimiento tácito de *Mumps*, nuestro amigo Bob Jakin no sólo había tomado esposa ocho meses atrás sino también una de esas viejas y raras casas atravesadas por sorprendentes pasillos, situada junto al agua, donde, como él mismo señalaba, su esposa y su madre podían entretenerse alquilando un par de botes de recreo en los que había invertido parte de sus ahorros y también alojando a un huésped para el salón y el dormitorio que quedaban libres. En estas circunstancias, ¿qué podría ser más adecuado para el interés de ambas partes, consideraciones higiénicas aparte, que el inquilino fuera el señor Tom?

La esposa de Bob abrió la puerta a Maggie. Era una mujer diminuta con aspecto de muñeca de madera articulada, que, en comparación con la madre de Bob, que ocupaba tras ella todo el pasillo, parecía una de esas figuras humanas que colocan los artistas junto a una estatua colosal para mostrar las proporciones. En cuanto abrió la puerta, la menuda mujer saludó a Maggie con una reverencia y alzó la vista hacia ella con respeto, pero las palabras «¿Está mi hermano en casa?» que pronunció Maggie con una sonrisa hicieron que diera media vuelta con repentina excitación.

—¡Madre, madre! ¡Avise a Bob! ¡Es la señorita Maggie! Pase, señorita, pase —dijo, abriendo una puerta lateral y esforzándose en aplastarse contra la pared para dejar más espacio a la visita.

Tristes recuerdos acudieron en tropel cuando Maggie entró en el pequeño salón que era ahora lo único que el pobre Tom podía considerar su casa, nombre que en otro tiempo, tantos años atrás, significaba para ambos la misma suma de objetos queridos y familiares. Pero no todo era extraño en aquella nueva sala: el primer lugar donde se posaron sus ojos fue la grande y antigua Biblia, si bien ésta no ayudó a dispersar los viejos recuerdos. Maggie permaneció de pie sin decir nada.

—Si *m'*hace el favor de sentarse, señorita —dijo la señora Jakin tras pasar el delantal por una silla perfectamente limpia y llevarse a la cara una esquina de la prenda con aire cohibido mientras miraba a Maggie con aire de interrogación.

—Entonces, ¿Bob está en casa? —preguntó Maggie, recobrando la calma y sonriendo a la tímida muñeca de madera.

—Sí, señorita; pero creo que está lavándose y vistiéndose: iré a mirar —anunció la señora Jakin, desapareciendo.

Pero no tardó en regresar con más valor, caminando detrás de su marido, el cual mostró los brillantes ojos azules y los dientes blancos y regulares desde la puerta, inclinándose respetuosamente.

—¿Cómo estás, Bob? —preguntó Maggie, avanzando y tendiéndole la mano—. Siempre he tenido ganas de visitar a tu esposa y, si ella me lo permite, regresaré otro día para verla a ella. Pero hoy he tenido que venir para hablar con mi hermano.

—No tardará en volver, señorita. Le van bien las cosas al señor Tom. Será uno de los primeros de por aquí, ya lo verá.

—Bueno, Bob, no me cabe duda de que, llegue a donde llegue, estará en deuda contigo: lo dijo él mismo la otra noche, hablando de ti.

—Bueno, ésa es su manera de verlo, pero yo me tomo muy en serio lo que dice, porque a él no se le suelta la lengua como a mí. Pardiez, soy peor que una botella inclinada: cuando empiezo no sé parar. Tiene usted muy buen aspecto, señorita, *m'*alegro mucho de verla. ¿Qué dices, Prissy? —dijo Bob, volviéndose hacia su esposa—. ¿No era como yo decía? Aunque, cuando me lanzo, es fácil que hable bien de muchas cosas.

La pequeña nariz de la mujer de Bob parecía seguir el ejemplo de sus ojos y se alzaba, reverente, hacia Maggie, pero ahora ya se sentía capaz de

sonreír y hacer reverencias.

—*M'*apetecía muchísimo conocerla, señorita, porque mi marido no ha *parao d'*hablar de *usté* como un loco, desde que empezó a cortejarme.

—Bueno, bueno —dijo Bob sintiéndose ridículo—. Ve a mirar cómo van las patatas, que si no el señor Tom tendrá que esperar.

—Espero que *Mumps* se lleve bien con la señora Jakin, Bob —dijo Maggie con una sonrisa—. Recuerdo que dijiste que no le gustaría que te casaras.

—Señorita, le pareció bien cuando vio lo pequeña que era. Por lo general hace como que no la ve, o piensa que todavía no ha *acabao* de crecer. Pero hablando del señor Tom, señorita —dijo Bob, bajando la voz y adoptando un aire serio—, es muy *reservao* pero yo soy listo, y cuando dejo el fardo y estoy mano sobre mano, me intereso por lo que piensan los demás. Y me preocupa que el señor Tom se quede sentado y solo, enfurruñado, con el ceño fruncido y mirando el fuego toda la noche. Un muchacho joven y bien *plantao* como él debería estar ya un poco más animado. Mi mujer entra algunas veces y él no se da cuenta, y dice que está mirando el fuego y arrugando el entrecejo, como si viera allí gente trabajando.

—Piensa mucho en los negocios —dijo Maggie.

—Sí —dijo Bob, bajando la voz—, pero ¿no le parece que piensa en algo más? El señor Tom es muy *cerrao*, pero yo soy listo. Y las pasadas Navidades se me ocurrió que quizá estaba enamorado. Se esforzó mucho por encontrar un pequeño spaniel negro, una raza rara. Pero algo pasó entonces que lo ha hecho más *callao* que nunca, aunque ha tenido mucha suerte. Y quería decírselo, señorita, porque pensaba que a lo mejor podría usted entenderlo, ahora que está aquí. Está demasiado solo, no tiene suficiente compañía.

—Me temo que tengo muy poco poder sobre él, Bob —dijo Maggie, muy conmovida por la sugerencia de Bob. La idea de que Tom pudiera tener penas amorosas era totalmente nueva. ¡Pobre muchacho! ¡Enamorado de Lucy, además! Pero quizá eran meras fantasías del cerebro de Bob, demasiado laborioso. Que le hubiera regalado un perro no significaba otra

cosa que gratitud y cariño entre primos. Pero Bob había dicho ya: «Aquí está el señor To» y la puerta principal se abría en aquel momento.

—Tom, no tengo tiempo que perder —dijo Maggie en cuanto Bob salió de la habitación—. Debo decirte ahora mismo para qué he venido y dejarte comer en paz.

Tom permanecía de pie, de espaldas a la chimenea, y Maggie estaba sentada frente a la luz. Tom advirtió que Maggie temblaba y presintió el asunto que deseaba tratar. Esta intuición le volvió la voz más dura y fría.

—¿De qué se trata?

El tono provocó la resistencia de Maggie y ésta planteó la petición de un modo muy distinto al que había previsto. Se puso de pie y miró a Tom de frente.

—Quiero que me liberes de la promesa sobre Philip Wakem. O, mejor dicho, te prometí que no lo vería sin decírtelo: vengo a comunicarte que deseo verlo.

—Muy bien —contestó Tom con mayor frialdad todavía.

Pero Maggie apenas había acabado de hablar de aquella manera fría y desafiante cuando se había arrepentido ya y empezaba a alarmarle el temor de distanciarse de nuevo de su hermano.

—No es por mí, querido Tom. No te enfades. No te lo habría pedido, pero Philip es amigo de Lucy y ella quiere que vaya a su casa: lo ha invitado a ir esta misma tarde, y le dije que no podía verlo sin decírtelo. Sólo lo veré en presencia de otras personas y entre nosotros no volverá a haber nada secreto.

Tom apartó la vista de Maggie y frunció el ceño un poco más durante un rato. Después se volvió hacia ella.

—Ya sabes lo que pienso sobre todo esto, Maggie —dijo lenta y enfáticamente—. No es necesario que te repita lo que te dije hace un año. Mientras nuestro padre estaba vivo, me sentí obligado a utilizar sobre ti todo mi poder para impedir que lo deshonraras a él, a ti misma y a todos nosotros. Pero ahora debo dejar que decidas tú. Después de la muerte de nuestro padre dijiste que querías ser independiente. No he cambiado de opinión. Si piensas volver a tratar a Philip Wakem como enamorado, deberás olvidarme.

—No es ése mi deseo, querido Tom, por lo menos tal como están ahora las cosas. Creo que no nos traería más que disgustos. Pero no tardaré en marcharme a otro trabajo y me gustaría volver a ser su amiga mientras estoy aquí. Lucy así lo desea.

La severidad del rostro de Tom se relajó un poco.

—No me importa que lo veas de vez en cuando en casa de nuestro tío y no quiero que conviertas esta cuestión en un problema. Pero no confío en ti, Maggie. Es fácil que te arrastren a hacer cualquier cosa.

Los labios de Maggie temblaron al oír aquellas palabras crueles.

—¿Por qué dices eso, Tom? Eres muy duro conmigo. ¿Acaso no he hecho y he soportado de todo tan bien como he podido? Y he cumplido la palabra que te di… No he llevado una vida más feliz que la tuya.

Empujada por las lágrimas, adoptó una actitud infantil. Cuando Maggie no estaba enfadada era tan sensible a las palabras duras o amables como una margarita a los rayos del sol o a las nubes: la necesidad de ser querida la dominaría siempre, igual que cuando se encontraba en el carcomido desván. La bondad del hermano se manifestaba con mayor facilidad ante este estimulo, pero sólo podía mostrarla a su modo. Le puso suavemente la mano en el brazo.

—Escúchame, Maggie —dijo con un tono de amable suficiencia—. Te explicaré lo que he querido decir. Estás siempre en los extremos, careces de juicio y no sabes controlarte; y, a pesar de todo, te crees muy lista y no consientes que te guíen. Ya sabes que yo no quise que buscaras un empleo. La tía Pullet estaba dispuesta a ofrecerte un buen hogar para que vivieras de modo respetable entre tus amistades hasta que yo pudiera conseguir una casa para ti y para nuestra madre. Eso es lo que a mí me gustaría. Quería que mi hermana fuera una dama y te habría cuidado siempre, como quería mi padre, hasta que te hubieras casado bien. Pero tus ideas y las mías nunca coinciden, Y no accediste: deberías tener suficiente sentido común para saber que un hermano que se desenvuelve en este mundo y se mezcla con otros hombres necesariamente conoce mejor que su hermana lo que es adecuado y respetable para ella. Crees que no soy amable, pero mi amabilidad sólo puede encaminarse hacia lo que creo bueno para ti.

—Sí, ya lo sé, querido Tom —dijo Maggie, todavía entre sollozos, pero intentado controlar las lágrimas—. Ya sé que harías muchas cosas por mí, ya sé lo mucho que trabajas y cómo te entregas en cuerpo y alma. Te lo agradezco, pero lo cierto es que no puedes decidir en mi lugar, porque nuestros caracteres son muy distintos. No sabes hasta qué punto las cosas me afectan de modo distinto que a ti.

—Sí, sí lo sé. Lo sé demasiado bien. Sé hasta qué punto ha tenido que ser distinta de la mía la consideración que te merece lo que afecta a nuestra familia y a tu dignidad de mujer para que se te ocurriera pensar siquiera en admitir que Philip Wakem te cortejara en secreto. Aunque no me desagradara en muchos otros sentidos, debería oponerme a que el nombre de mi hermana se asociara, aunque sólo fuera un instante, al de un joven cuyo padre debe de odiar hasta nuestro pensamiento y que, sin duda, llegado el momento te desdeñaría. En el caso de cualquier otra persona, daría por hecho que lo que presenciaste justo antes de la muerte de nuestro padre bastaría para quitarte de la cabeza la idea de tener a Philip Wakem como enamorado. Pero contigo no estoy seguro; contigo nunca estoy seguro de nada. Tan pronto te complace una especie de perversa mortificación como te falta decisión para resistirte a algo que sabes que está mal.

Las palabras de Tom contenían una verdad lacerante, esa cáscara de la verdad que es lo único que perciben las personas sin imaginación ni capacidad de comprensión. Maggie siempre se estremecía ante los juicios de Tom: se rebelaba y se sentía humillada a la vez, como si su hermano sostuviera delante de ella un espejo para mostrarle su locura y su debilidad, como si fuera una voz que predijera sus errores; y, sin embargo, al mismo tiempo, ella también lo juzgaba y decía para sí que era estrecho de miras e injusto, que no era capaz de sentir las necesidades espirituales que con frecuencia eran origen de los errores o actitudes absurdas que hacían de la vida de Maggie un misterio indescifrable.

Maggie no contestó de inmediato: tenía el corazón demasiado lleno. Se sentó y apoyó un brazo en la mesa. De nada serviría intentar convencer a Tom de que lo quería. Siempre la rechazaba. La impresión causada por las palabras de su hermano se complicaba con la referencia a la última escena entre su padre y Wakem y, finalmente, aquel recuerdo doloroso y solemne

se impuso sobre los agravios inmediatos. ¡No! No pensaba en aquellas cosas con frívola indiferencia y Tom no debería acusarla de ello. Alzó la vista hacia él con una mirada grave y seria.

—Nada de lo que te diga conseguirá que tengas mejor opinión de mí. Pero no estoy tan lejos de tus sentimientos como crees. Me doy cuenta tan bien como tú que, dada nuestra posición en relación con el padre de Philip, aunque no en otros aspectos, sería poco razonable, sería un error que pensáramos en el matrimonio, y ya no considero a Philip mi enamorado… Y te digo la verdad y no tienes derecho a dudar de mí: he cumplido la palabra que te di y nunca has visto que mintiera. No sólo no debería fomentar, sino evitar con todo cuidado cualquier trato con Philip que no se basara en una amistad tranquila y distante. Puedes pensar que soy incapaz de mantener mis decisiones, pero no deberías tratarme con desprecio por errores que todavía no he cometido.

—Bien, Maggie —dijo Tom, ablandándose un poco ante su ruego—. No quiero forzar las cosas. Me parece que, teniéndolo todo en cuenta, será mejor que veas a Philip Wakem, si Lucy desea que vaya a su casa. Creo en lo que dices: o que, al menos, tú lo crees así. Yo sólo puedo advertirte. Me gustaría ser tan buen hermano como tú me permitas.

La voz de Tom tembló un poco cuando pronunció estas últimas palabras, y el afecto de Maggie regresó repentinamente, como cuando eran niños y compartían un trozo de pastel como sacramento de conciliación. Se puso en pie y colocó una mano sobre el hombro de Tom.

—Querido Tom, ya sé que quieres ser bueno conmigo. Sé que has tenido que pasar por muchas cosas y que lo has hecho muy bien. Me gustaría ser para ti un consuelo y no una preocupación. ¿Verdad que ahora no piensas que soy mala del todo?

Tom sonrió al ver el rostro ansioso de Maggie: sus sonrisas, cuando surgían, eran muy agradables, ya que bajo el ceño aquellos ojos grises podían ser tiernos.

—No, Maggie.

—Tal vez sea mejor de lo que esperas.

—Me gustaría que así fuera.

—¿Puedo venir algún día a prepararte el té y ver otra vez a la diminuta mujer de Bob?

—Sí, pero ahora márchate a toda prisa, porque no tengo más tiempo —dijo Tom, mirando el reloj.

—¿No me das un beso?

Tom se inclinó para besarla en da mejilla.

—¡Ea! Sé buena. Hoy tengo que pensar en muchas cosas. Esta tarde tendré una larga reunión con el tío Deane.

—¿Vendrás mañana a casa de la tía Glegg? Comeremos todos temprano para acudir a tomar el té. Tienes que ir: Lucy me dijo que te lo pidiera.

—Bah, tengo mucho que hacer —dijo Tom. Tiró bruscamente de la cuerda de la campana y la arrancó.

—Me asustas y huyo —exclamó Maggie, riendo.

Mientras tanto, Tom, con masculina filosofía, tiró la cuerda de la campana al otro extremo de la habitación, que tampoco quedaba muy lejos. Un gesto al que, según creo, no serán ajenos muchos hombres importantes o distinguidos que en la primera etapa de su ascenso social acariciaron grandes esperanzas en pequeñas viviendas.

Capítulo V

En él se muestra que Tom consigue lo que se propone

—Y ahora que ya hemos zanjado lo del negocio de Newcastle, Tom —dijo el señor Deane aquella misma tarde mientras permanecían sentados en la sala privada del banco—, quiero hablarte de otra cosa. Puesto que es probable que en Newcastle tengas que soportar mal tiempo y mucho humo durante las próximas semanas, sin duda desearás tener una buena perspectiva que te anime un poco.

Tom aguardó más tranquilo que en otras ocasiones anteriores mientras su tío sacaba la caja de rapé y repartía la dosis entre las dos ventanas de su nariz con cuidadosa imparcialidad.

—Mira, Tom —prosiguió el señor Deane, por fin, recostándose en el sillón—, el mundo avanza ahora con un paso más rápido que cuando yo era joven. Caramba, señor mío, si hace cuarenta años, cuando yo era un joven robusto como tú, un hombre pasaba gran parte de su vida tirando del carro antes de tener el látigo en la mano. Los telares eran más lentos y las modas no cambiaban tan deprisa: recuerdo que mi traje bueno fue el mismo durante seis años. Todo tenía una escala menor en relación con los gastos, señor mío. El vapor lo ha cambiado todo: arrastra las máquinas al doble de velocidad y, con ellas, la rueda de la fortuna, tal como dijo nuestro amigo, el señor Guest, en la comida de aniversario. Describe muy bien la situación, teniendo en cuenta que no ha visto nunca el negocio de cerca. A mí no me disgustan estos cambios como a otras personas. El comercio, señor mío,

abre los ojos de la gente. Y si la población va a seguir creciendo, el mundo debe poner el ingenio al servicio de inventos de un tipo u otro. Sé que he contribuido a ello como simple hombre de negocios. Alguien ha dicho que es bueno hacer crecer dos espigas allí donde sólo crecía una: pero, señor mío, también es bueno avanzar en el intercambio de bienes y llevar grano a la boca de quien tiene hambre. Y en este sentido se orienta nuestro negocio y lo considero tan digno como el que más.

Tom sabía que el asunto que su tío iba a tratar no era urgente; el señor Deane era un hombre demasiado astuto y práctico para permitir que los recuerdos o el rapé frenaran el avance del negocio. Lo cierto era que durante los últimos meses Tom había recibido indirectas que le permitían adivinar que iba a oír alguna proposición ventajosa. Con el principio de este último párrafo, había estirado las piernas, metido las manos en los bolsillos y se había preparado para alguna prolija introducción destinada a mostrar que el señor Deane había triunfado por mérito propio y que lo que tenía que decir a los jóvenes en general era que si ellos no conseguían triunfar también se debía a sus propios deméritos. Así pues, se sorprendió bastante cuando su tío le formuló una pregunta directa.

—Veamos, hace ya siete años que me pediste un empleo, ¿verdad, Tom?

—Sí, señor. Ahora tengo veintitrés —contestó Tom.

—Ah. Mejor no lo digas, porque pareces mayor y en los negocios la edad cuenta a favor de uno. Recuerdo muy bien tu visita: recuerdo que vi que tenías valor y eso fue lo que me empujó a animarte. Y me alegra decir que yo tenía razón, no es fácil engañarme. Como es natural, era reacio a promover la carrera de mi sobrino, pero me alegra decir que me has dejado en buen lugar, señor mío, y que si tuviera un hijo no me disgustaría nada que fuera como tú.

El señor Deane repiqueteó sobre la caja y la abrió de nuevo, mientras repetía con afecto: «No, no me disgustaría nada que fuera como t».

—Estoy muy contento de que esté satisfecho de mí, señor. Me he esforzado tanto como he podido —contestó Tom con su tono orgulloso e independiente.

—Sí, Tom, estoy satisfecho de ti. No me refiero a tu actitud como hijo, aunque eso también pesa en mi opinión. Como socio de esta empresa, me

intereso por las cualidades que has mostrado como hombre de negocios. El nuestro es un buen negocio, una empresa espléndida, y no hay motivo para que no siga creciendo: crece el capital y crecen los puntos de venta. Pero para que cualquier empresa, grande o pequeña, prospere, también es necesario que tenga otra cosa: hombres que la dirijan, hombres de costumbres adecuadas en los que se pueda confiar, y no esos jóvenes de mal gusto. El señor Guest y yo vemos este aspecto con claridad. Hace tres años hicimos a Guest partícipe de esta empresa y le dimos una parte del molino de aceite. ¿Por qué? Porque los servicios de Guest merecían un premio. Así será siempre, señor mío. Así me sucedió a mí. Y aunque Guest tiene casi diez años más que tú, tienes a tu favor otros aspectos.

A medida que el señor Deane hablaba, Tom iba poniéndose nervioso. Deseaba decir algo a su tío que tal vez no le gustara, puesto que en lugar de aceptar su ofrecimiento pensaba presentarle una sugerencia.

—Resulta evidente —prosiguió el señor Deane tras terminar otra pulgada— que el hecho de que seas mi sobrino cuenta a tu favor, pero no niego que aunque no fueras pariente mío, el modo en que te ocupaste del asunto del banco de Pelley nos habría llevado, al señor Guest y a mí, a reconocer de algún modo los servicios prestados. Todo ello, respaldado por tu actitud y tu habilidad para los negocios, nos ha decidido a darte una participación en el negocio que, con el transcurso de los años, nos gustará ir ampliando. Me parece que eso será mejor, en todos los sentidos, que subirte el sueldo. Te dará más importancia y te preparará mejor para ir haciéndote cargo de responsabilidades que ahora pesan sobre mis hombros. Gracias a Dios, ahora soy capaz de ocuparme de mucho trabajo, pero estoy haciéndome viejo, no se puede negar. Le dije al señor Guest que trataría el tema contigo y que cuando vuelvas de ese asunto en el Norte pasaremos a tratar los detalles. Es un gran paso para un joven de veintitrés años, pero tengo que decir que te lo mereces.

—Se lo agradezco mucho al señor Guest y a usted, señor. Naturalmente, me siento especialmente en deuda con usted, que me metió en el negocio y se ha ocupado de mí —dijo Tom temeroso, y se calló unos instantes.

—Sí, sí —insistió el señor Deane—. No ahorro esfuerzos cuando veo que servirán para algo. También me ocupé de Guest; en caso contrario, no

estaría donde está.

—Sin embargo, desearía decirle una cosa, tío. Nunca se lo he contado. Si usted recuerda, cuando la propiedad de mi padre se vendió, se estudió la posibilidad de que su empresa comprara el molino: sé que usted pensaba que sería una inversión muy buena, especialmente si se le aplicaba vapor.

—Sin duda, sin duda. Pero Wakem pujó más que nosotros. Es bastante aficionado a pasar por delante de otros.

—Tal vez no sirva de nada que lo mencione en este momento —prosiguió Tom—, pero desearía que usted supiera los planes que tengo sobre el molino. Le tengo mucho cariño. El último deseo de mi padre fue que intentara recuperarlo en cuanto pudiera, ya que llevaba en su familia cinco generaciones, y yo se lo prometí. Y, además, me gusta especialmente ese lugar, nunca me gustará otro tanto como aquél. Y si en alguna ocasión se le ocurriera a usted comprarlo para la empresa, entonces me sería más fácil cumplir los deseos de mi padre. No tenía intención de mencionarlo, pero lo he hecho puesto que usted ha tenido la amabilidad de decir que mis servicios han sido útiles. Renunciaría a mejores oportunidades en la vida a cambio de recuperar el molino: es decir, tenerlo en mis manos e ir aumentando su valor lentamente.

El señor Deane, tras escuchar atentamente, quedó pensativo.

—Entiendo, entiendo —dijo, al cabo de un rato—. Sería posible si hubiera alguna posibilidad de que Wakem deseara desprenderse de la propiedad, pero no lo creo. Ha colocado a ese joven Jetsome y estoy seguro de que, cuando lo compró, tuvo sus motivos.

—Ese Jetsome es una oveja descarriada —dijo Tom—. Ha empezado a beber y dicen que está abandonando el negocio. Luke, nuestro viejo molinero, me lo contó. Dice que no se quedará a menos que se produzca algún cambio. Y yo pensaba que, si las cosas seguían así, Wakem estaría más dispuesto a desprenderse del molino. Luke dice que le disgusta el modo en que van las cosas.

—Bien, ya lo pensaré, Tom. Debo averiguar cosas y tratarlo con el señor Guest. Pero es empezar en una vía nueva y ponerte al frente en lugar de dejarte donde estás, que es lo que queríamos.

—En cuanto las cosas vayan bien, podré dedicarme a algo más que al molino. Quiero tener mucho trabajo, no hay nada que me interese tanto.

Resultaba un poco triste que un joven de veintitrés años dijera eso, incluso para unos oídos tan aficionados a los negocios como los del señor Deane.

—¡Bah, bah! Pronto tendrás una esposa de la que ocuparte, si sigues por este camino. Pero en cuanto a ese molino, no debemos apresurarnos. De todos modos, te prometo que lo tendré en cuenta y que cuando vuelvas hablaremos de nuevo. Ahora me voy a comer, ven mañana a desayunar con nosotros y despídete de tu hermana y de tu madre antes de partir.

Capítulo VI

En el que se ilustran las leyes de la atracción

Te resultará ya evidente, lector, que Maggie había alcanzado un momento de su vida que cualquier persona prudente consideraría una gran oportunidad para una mujer joven. Presentada a la alta sociedad de Saint Ogg's con el apoyo de una llamativa personalidad que tenía la ventaja de resultar poco familiar a la mayoría de los habituales y con el escaso respaldo de los atavíos que Lucy había mencionado, inquieta, en la conversación con la tía Pullet, sin duda Maggie se encontraba en un nuevo punto de partida en la vida. Durante la primera fiesta que dio Lucy, el joven Torry se fatigó los músculos faciales más que de costumbre con la intención que la «muchacha de ojos oscuros del rincó» se fijara en él y en el estilo que le confería el monóculo: y varias jóvenes se marcharon a su casa con la intención de hacerse unas mangas cortas de encaje negro y trenzarse el cabello en una ancha corona en la nuca: «Esa prima de la señorita Deane resultaba muy distinguid». Lo cierto era que la pobre Maggie, por muy consciente que fuera de su doloroso pasado y presintiera un futuro incierto, estaba convirtiéndose en objeto de cierta envidia y tema de conversación en el nuevo salón de billar y entre bellas amigas que no tenían secretos las unas con las otras cuando se trataba de acicalarse.

Las señoritas Guest, que se relacionaban con cierta condescendencia con las familias de Saint Ogg's y eran el espejo de la moda en el lugar, censuraron ligeramente los modales de Maggie. Tenía por costumbre no asentir de inmediato a los comentarios habituales en la buena sociedad y

decir que no sabía si estos comentarios eran ciertos o no, lo que le daba un aire de *gaucherie* y entorpecía el flujo de la conversación; sin embargo, bien puede darse una interpretación positiva a este juicio, puesto que el hecho de que una nueva amistad de su sexo muestre cierta inferioridad no necesariamente predispone en contra a las damas. Y Maggie carecía de modo tan completo de los lindos aires de coquetería que, según se cree, llevan a los caballeros a la desesperación, que suscitaba cierta piedad femenina por ser tan incompetente a pesar de su belleza. ¡Pobrecilla, había tenido una vida muy dura! Y había que reconocer que no tenía ningunas pretensiones: sus modales bruscos e irregulares eran sin duda resultado de sus solitarias y modestas circunstancias. Resultaba sorprendente que no poseyera el menor rasgo vulgar, teniendo en cuenta cómo era el resto de los parientes de la pobre Lucy: esta alusión siempre hacía que las señoritas Guest se estremecieran un poco. No era agradable pensar en que emparentarían por matrimonio con personas como los Glegg y los Pullet, pero no servía de nada llevar la contraria a Stephen cuando tomaba una decisión. Y, sin duda, nada había que reprochar a la propia Lucy, a la que era imposible dejar de apreciar. Sin duda, deseaba que las señoritas Guest se mostraran amables con su prima, a la que tanto apreciaba, y Stephen se enfadaría mucho si no se comportaban con toda cortesía. En estas circunstancias, no faltaron las invitaciones a Park House y a otros lugares: la señorita Deane era un miembro de la sociedad de Saint Ogg's demasiado distinguido y destacado para que se le negara ninguna atención.

Así fue como Maggie conoció la vida de una dama joven y supo lo que era levantarse por la mañana sin un motivo especial para hacer una cosa en lugar de otra. Esta nueva sensación de ociosidad y de placer sin límite entre los aires suaves y los perfumes del jardín, avanzada ya la primavera, entre la música abundante y los lentos paseos a la luz del sol o la deliciosa ensoñación de dejarse arrastrar por el río, difícilmente podría dejar de tener efectos embriagadores tras tantos años de privaciones; ya en la primera semana, Maggie empezó a sentirse menos acosada por los tristes recuerdos y pronósticos. La vida era muy agradable en aquel momento: empezaba a gustarle arreglarse por la noche y sentir que era una de las bellezas de aquella primavera. Y ahora siempre la aguardaban ojos llenos de

admiración; ya no era un ser insignificante al que se podía reprender y cuya atención se reclamaba sin que nadie se sintiera obligado a prestarle ninguna. También resultaba agradable, cuando Stephen y Lucy salían a dar un paseo a caballo, sentarse sola al piano y advertir que la antigua sintonía entre los dedos y las teclas seguía presente y revivía —como un parentesco fiel que no desaparecía con la separación— para sacar las melodías que había oído la noche anterior y repetirlas una y otra vez hasta encontrar el modo de reproducirlas, convertidas en un lenguaje más elocuente y apasionado. La mera concordancia de las octavas le encantaba, y con frecuencia prefería tocar el libro de ejercicios que una melodía para disfrutar más intensamente, a través de la abstracción, de la primitiva sensación de los intervalos. El modo en que disfrutaba de la música no indicaba un gran talento en concreto: su sensibilidad ante el estímulo supremo de la música era un aspecto más de la apasionada sensibilidad que la caracterizaba y hacía que sus defectos y virtudes se mezclaran, convertía algunas veces su afecto en enojada exigencia, pero también impedía que su vanidad tomara forma de argucia y coquetería femenina y le confería la poesía de la ambición. Pero, lector, hace ya tiempo que conoces a Maggie y no es necesario que se te describa su carácter, sino su historia, que es difícil de predecir aún desde el más completo conocimiento del primero. Porque la tragedia de nuestras vidas no se crea del todo en nuestro interior. Dice Novalis que «el carácter es el destin», pero no todo nuestro destino. Hamlet, príncipe de Dinamarca, era dado a la especulación y la indecisión, y como consecuencia tenemos una gran tragedia. Pero si su padre hubiera vivido hasta una edad avanzada y su tío hubiera fallecido pronto, podemos imaginar que Hamlet llegara a casarse con Ofelia y viviera la vida sin que nadie pusiera en duda su cordura, a pesar de su afición a los soliloquios y a algún sarcasmo contra la bella hija de Polonio, para no hablar de una total falta de cortesía hacia su suegro.

Así pues, el futuro de Maggie se halla todavía escondido y debemos esperar a que se revele como el curso de un río no descrito en los mapas: sólo sabemos que este río es caudaloso y rápido y que todos los ríos tienen el mismo final. Bajo el encanto de los nuevos placeres, la misma Maggie estaba dejando de pensar, con su ansiosa imaginación, en la suerte que le

aguardaba; y cada vez le inquietaba menos el primer encuentro con Philip: quizá, de modo inconsciente, no lamentaba que el encuentro se hubiera retrasado.

Lo cierto era que Philip no apareció la tarde en que se lo esperaba, y el señor Guest les comunicó que se había ido a la costa, probablemente, a su parecer, para hacer algunos bocetos; no se sabía la fecha de su regreso. Aquello de irse sin decir nada era muy propio de Philip. No regresó hasta pasados doce días y, a su vuelta, encontró esperándolo las dos notas de Lucy: se había marchado antes de tener noticia de la llegada de Maggie.

Tal vez sea necesario contar de nuevo diecinueve años para comprender los sentimientos que llenaron a Maggie durante aquellos doce días, entender hasta qué punto se prolongaron éstos gracias a la novedad de sus experiencias y los diversos estados de su ánimo. Los primeros días de una amistad casi siempre tienen una importancia especial y ocupan mayor espacio en nuestra memoria que otros periodos posteriores, menos llenos de impresiones y descubrimientos. En esos diez días no hubo muchas horas que el señor Guest no pasara sentado junto a Lucy o de pie junto a ella mientras tocaba el piano, o acompañándola en alguna excursión: sin duda, sus atenciones eran más asiduas, y eso era lo que todo el mundo esperaba. Lucy estaba muy feliz, especialmente porque la compañía de Stephen parecía ser mucho más interesante y divertida desde que Maggie estaba allí. Entablaban conversaciones jocosas o serias en las que Stephen y Maggie se mostraban con toda naturalidad ante la admiración de la amable y discreta Lucy; y en más de una ocasión se le ocurrió pensar en el encantador cuarteto que formarían cuando Maggie se casara con Philip. ¿Resulta inexplicable que una muchacha disfrute más de la compañía de su amado en presencia de una tercera persona y no sienta la menor punzada de celos si la conversación se dirige casi siempre a esa otra persona? No es así cuando la muchacha posee un corazón sereno como Lucy, está convencida de que conoce la naturaleza de los afectos de sus compañeros y no es propensa a los sentimientos que suscitan estas ideas en ausencia de pruebas fehacientes. Además, Stephen se sentaba junto a Lucy, le ofrecía el brazo a ella y buscaba su respaldo, convencido de encontrarlo; y cada día mostraba hacia ella la misma tierna cortesía, la misma conciencia de sus necesidades

y el mismo cuidado en colmarlas. ¿Las mismas? A Lucy le parecía que incluso más, y no es de extrañar que no comprendiera el verdadero significado de aquel cambio. Era una actitud sutil de la que el mismo Stephen no era consciente. Las atenciones personales que dedicaba a Maggie eran, en comparación, escasas e incluso había surgido entre ambos una distancia aparente que impedía que Stephen repitiera el gesto levemente galante del primer día en el bote. Si Stephen entraba en la sala cuando Lucy se encontraba ausente, o si Lucy los dejaba solos, no se dirigían la palabra: Stephen bien podía simular que examinaba los libros o las partituras y Maggie inclinaba la cabeza aplicadamente sobre la labor. Ambos eran conscientes de modo total y opresivo de la presencia del otro. Y, sin embargo, ambos deseaban que al día siguiente se repitiera la situación. Ninguno de los dos había empezado a reflexionar sobre el asunto ni se había preguntado en silencio adónde llevaba todo aquello. Maggie se limitaba a sentir que la vida se mostraba para ella como algo nuevo y estaba absorta en la experiencia directa, inmediata, sin que le quedara energía para reflexionar y razonar sobre ella. Stephen se abstenía deliberadamente de preguntarse a sí mismo y se negaba a reconocer una influencia que podría llegar a determinar su conducta. Y cuando Lucy regresaba a la habitación, se comportaban de nuevo con espontaneidad: Maggie se sentía capaz de llevar la contraria a Stephen y reírse de él, y él podía aconsejarle que siguiera el ejemplo de aquella heroína tan encantadora, la señorita Sophia Western, que sentía un gran «respeto por el juicio de los hombre»[33]. Maggie podía mirar a Stephen —cosa que, por un motivo u otro, evitaba siempre cuando estaban solos— y él incluso llegaba a pedirle que lo acompañara al piano, ya que Lucy estaba tan ocupada con las labores para la venta benéfica, y se atrevía a regañarla por acelerar el *tempo*, sin duda, el punto débil de Maggie.

Un día, el del regreso de Philip, Lucy tuvo un repentino compromiso para pasar la tarde con la señora Kenn, cuyo delicado estado de salud, que amenazaba con degenerar en enfermedad por un ataque de bronquitis, la obligaba a delegar sus funciones de la cercana venta benéfica en manos de otras damas, una de las cuales deseaba que fuera Lucy. El compromiso se había acordado en presencia de Stephen, y éste oyó que Lucy prometía salir

pronto y recoger a las seis a la señorita Torry, la cual le había traído la petición de la señora Kenn.

—He aquí otro de los resultados morales de esta idiotez de fiesta benéfica —espetó Stephen en cuanto la señorita Torry salió de la habitación —. ¡Alejar a las jóvenes damas de los deberes del hogar y lanzarlas a escenas de disipación entre tapetitos acolchados para teteras y bolsitos bordados! Me gustaría saber cuál es la misión de las mujeres, si no es dar argumentos para que los esposos se queden en casa y motivos todavía más poderosos para que los solteros salgan de la suya. Si esto dura mucho, se disolverán los vínculos sociales.

—Bien, esto no durará mucho —contestó Lucy riendo—, porque la venta será el lunes que viene.

—¡Gracias al cielo! —exclamó Stephen—. El mismo Kenn dijo el otro día que no le gustaba que la vanidad se ocupara de la caridad; pero como los británicos no son lo bastante razonables para soportar los impuestos directos, Saint Ogg's no tiene capacidad o motivos suficientes para construir y dotar colegios sin recurrir a la insensatez.

—¿Dijo eso? —preguntó la pequeña Lucy, con los ojos inquietos y bien abiertos—. Nunca le he oído decir nada semejante, pensaba que aprobaba lo que hacíamos.

—Estoy seguro de que le parece bien todo lo que usted hace —contestó Stephen dedicándole una sonrisa afectuosa—. Su conducta al salir esta tarde parece atroz, pero yo sé que en el fondo la intención es buena.

—Oh, tiene usted una opinión excesivamente buena de mí —dijo Lucy agitando da cabeza con un lindo rubor. Ahí se abandonó la cuestión, pero se dio por hecho que Stephen no acudiría por la tarde y, debido a ese tácito acuerdo, prolongó la visita de la mañana hasta convertirla en la más larga de todas y no se despidió hasta después de las cuatro.

Poco después de comer, Maggie estaba sentada en el salón sola, con *Minny* sobre el regazo, tras dejar a su tío tomando un oporto y dormitando y a su madre en un lugar intermedio entre el punto de media y las cabezadas, cosa que, cuando no tenían invitados, hacía siempre en el comedor hasta la hora del té. Maggie se inclinaba para acariciar al diminuto y sedoso perrito y consolarlo por la ausencia de su ama cuando el sonido de unos pasos en la

gravilla hizo que levantara da vista y vio a Stephen Guest avanzando por el jardín como si viniera directamente del río. ¡Era muy raro verlo tan pronto después de comer! Con frecuencia se lamentaba de que en Park House comían tarde. Pero allí estaba, con su traje negro: sin duda, había pasado por su casa y había regresado por el río. Maggie sintió que le ardían las mejillas y el corazón le latía: era normal que se pusiera nerviosa, ya que no estaba acostumbrada a atender sola a las visitas. Stephen la vio mirar a través del ventanal abierto y la saludó con el sombrero mientras se encaminaba hacia éste y entraba por ahí, en lugar de ir hasta la puerta. Él también estaba sonrojado y, sin duda, cuando entró con una partitura enrollada en la mano, parecía todo lo atolondrado que un joven de cierto tino y serenidad puede mostrarse.

—Le sorprende volver a verme, señorita Tulliver —dijo con aire de vacilante improvisación—. Debería excusarme por aparecer por sorpresa, pero quería ir a la ciudad y he hecho que un criado me trajera remando, de modo que se me ha ocurrido traer estas partituras de la *Doncella de Artois*[34] para su prima. Esta mañana se me ha olvidado. ¿Querrá dársela?

—Sí —contestó Maggie. Se había levantado confusa con *Minny* entre los brazos y, sin saber qué hacer, se sentó de nuevo.

Stephen depositó el sombrero junto a las partituras, que rodaron al suelo, y se sentó en la silla situada a su lado. Nunca lo había hecho y tanto él como Maggie eran conscientes de que se trataba de una situación totalmente nueva.

—¡Mira el perrito mimado! —exclamó Stephen, inclinándose para tirar de las largas orejas rizadas que colgaban sobre el brazo de Maggie. No era un comentario muy sugerente y, puesto que su autor no añadió ningún otro, la conversación quedó en un punto muerto. Stephen tenía la sensación de que estaba soñando y se veía obligado a ejecutar una serie de actos mientras se preguntaba el motivo, por qué estaba acariciando en aquel momento la cabeza de *Minny*. Sin embargo, era muy agradable: sólo deseaba atreverse a mirar a Maggie y que ella lo mirara; si ella le dirigía una mirada prolongada con aquellos ojos profundos y extraños quedaría satisfecho y se portaría después de modo razonable. Tenía la sensación de que estaba convirtiéndose en una especie de obsesión el deseo de obtener una larga

mirada de Maggie, y no cejaba de estrujarse da imaginación para encontrar algún medio de conseguirla sin que de ello derivara una situación tensa. En cuanto a Maggie, no pensaba en nada en concreto, sólo sentía como si se cerniera sobre ella en la oscuridad un pájaro de gran envergadura, de tal modo que era incapaz de levantar la vista y no veía nada más que el rizado pelo negro de *Minny*.

Aquella situación tenía que terminar: tal vez acabó muy pronto y sólo pareció ser larga, como sucede con un solo minuto de sueño. Finalmente, Stephen se enderezó y se colocó de lado en la silla, con un brazo sobre el respaldo y mirando a Maggie. ¿Qué iba a decir?

—Vamos a tener una puesta de sol espléndida, ¿no quiere salir a verla?

—No lo sé —contestó Maggie, tras lo cual alzó la vista valientemente y miró por la ventana—. Tal vez, si no juego al *cribbage* con mi tío.

Una pausa. *Minny* recibió más caricias, pero poseía suficiente criterio Para no agradecerlas y soltar algún pequeño gruñido.

—¿Le gusta estar sentada a solas?

Una expresión pícara apareció en el rostro de Maggie, que lanzó una breve mirada a Stephen.

—¿Sería correcto contestar que sí?

—Lo cierto es que es una pregunta peligrosa para que la formule un intruso —dijo Stephen, encantado con la mirada y decidido a quedarse el tiempo suficiente para obtener otra—. Pero tendrá más de media hora para sí después de que me vaya —añadió, sacando el reloj—. Sé que el señor Deane nunca aparece hasta las siete y media.

Otra pausa: Maggie mantuvo la mirada fija a través de la ventana, sin embargo, con gran esfuerzo, movió la cabeza para contemplar de nuevo el lomo de *Minny*.

—Ojalá Lucy no hubiera tenido que irse. Hoy no tendremos música.

—Mañana por la noche contaremos con una nueva voz —anunció Stephen—. ¿Tendrá a bien comunicar a su prima que su amigo Philip Wakem ha regresado? Lo he visto al volver a casa.

Maggie se sobresaltó un poco; fue poco más que una vibración que la recorrió de pies a cabeza durante un instante, pero las nuevas imágenes que el nombre de Philip había sugerido dispersaron parte del encanto que la

tenía hechizada. Se puso en pie con una decisión repentina y, tras depositar a *Minny* sobre su cojín, fue a buscar al rincón la gran cesta de labor de Lucy. Stephen se sintió ofendido y decepcionado: pensó que, tal vez, a Maggie no le gustaba que mencionaran a Wakem en su presencia inesperadamente, puesto que ahora recordaba que Lucy le había contado algo de una disputa familiar. No merecía la pena prolongar la visita. En aquel momento, Maggie se sentaba ante la mesa con su labor, con aire gélido y orgulloso; y él… él parecía un tonto por haberse presentado allí. Sin duda, las visitas totalmente superfluas y gratuitas como aquélla hacían que cualquier hombre pareciera desagradable y ridículo. Resultaba evidente para Maggie que había comido rápidamente en su habitación para poder salir de nuevo y encontrarla sola.

¡Una actitud infantil en un joven y cumplido caballero de veinticinco años que no carecía de estudios de leyes! Aunque, tal vez, una referencia a la historia pueda hacerla verosímil.

En ese momento, el ovillo de lana cayó rodando al sucio y Maggie se levantó para cogerlo. Stephen hizo lo mismo y, tras recoger el ovillo, se lo dio. Sus ojos se encontraron y Maggie observó en él una mirada ofendida y dolida totalmente nueva para ella.

—Adiós —dijo Stephen en un tono que mostraba el mismo descontento implorante que sus ojos. No se atrevió a tenderle la mano y las hundió en los bolsillos de la levita. Maggie pensó que tal vez se había comportado de modo descortés.

—¿No quiere quedarse un poco más? —preguntó, con timidez, sin apartar la vista para no volver a parecer grosera.

—No, gracias —contestó Stephen mirando fijamente aquellos ojos medio remisos, medio fascinados, como un hombre sediento contempla el camino que lleva a un arroyo lejano—. Está esperándome el bote… Dígaselo a su prima.

—Sí.

—Que he traído las partituras, quiero decir.

—Sí.

—Y que ha vuelto Philip Wakem.

—Sí. —En esta ocasión, el nombre de Philip pasó inadvertido.

—¿No quiere acompañarme un poco por el jardín? —preguntó Stephen en un tono todavía más amable, pero al instante le irritó que Maggie no se hubiera negado, porque ésta se dirigió hacia la ventana abierta y él se vio obligado a ir a buscar el sombrero y caminar a su lado. No obstante, se le ocurrió un súbito desagravio.

—Apóyese en mi brazo —dijo, bajando la voz, como si fuera un secreto. Para la mayoría de las mujeres, el ofrecimiento de un brazo firme resulta extrañamente irresistible: aunque no se necesite, la sensación de ayuda, la presencia de una fuerza ajena y, sin embargo, propia, satisface una necesidad siempre presente en la imaginación. Por ése u otro motivo, Maggie aceptó el brazo. Y caminaron juntos en torno a la franja de césped, bajo el verde suspendido de los codesos, en el mismo estado de ensoñación del cuarto de hora anterior; aunque Stephen ya había conseguido la mirada que ansiaba, todavía no advertía en sí mismo los síntomas de un regreso a un estado razonable y rápidos pensamientos cruzaban el turbio ánimo de Maggie: ¿cómo era posible que estuviera allí? ¿Por qué había salido? No cruzaron ni una palabra. De haber sido así, la presencia del otro se habría hecho menos intensa.

—Tenga cuidado con el escalón —dijo finalmente Stephen.

—¡Oh! Quisiera marcharme a casa —exclamó Maggie con la sensación de que el escalón la había salvado—. Buenas tardes.

En un instante se había desprendido de su brazo y corría hacia la casa. No pensó que este acto repentino sería uno más de los gestos de la última media hora que luego recordaría avergonzada, no podía pensar en nada más. Se dejó caer en el sillón y se echó a llorar.

—¡Oh, Philip, Philip! Ojalá estuviéramos juntos otra vez, tranquilos en las Fosas Rojas.

Stephen la miró alejarse y se dirigió hacia el bote; no tardó en llegar al muelle. Pasó la tarde en los salones de billar, fumando un cigarro tras otro y perdiendo una y otra vez. Pero no quería marcharse. Estaba decidido a no pensar, a no admitir ningún otro recuerdo concreto que la presencia perpetua de Maggie que se imponía sobre él. Él la miraba y ella lo tomaba del brazo.

Finalmente se impuso la necesidad de regresar andando a casa bajo la fría luz de las estrellas y con ella, la de maldecir su locura y decidir amargamente que no volvería a quedarse solo con Maggie. Todo aquello era un disparate: estaba enamorado de Lucy, la quería mucho y estaba comprometido, todo lo comprometido que un hombre de palabra necesita. Deseaba no haber visto nunca a aquella Maggie Tulliver, que no lo hubiera lanzado a aquel estado febril: sería una esposa dulce, extraña, inquietante y adorable para cualquier otro hombre, pero él nunca la habría elegido. ¿Sentiría ella lo mismo que él? Ojalá… no. No debería haber ido. En el futuro se controlaría más. Se mostraría desagradable, tal vez discutirían. ¿Pelearse con ella? ¿Acaso era posible pelearse con una criatura con unos ojos como los suyos: desafiantes y críticos, contradictorios y pertinaces, imperiosos e implorantes… llenos de opuestos deliciosos? Ver a una mujer semejante sometida por amor sería una fortuna muy deseable… para otro.

Terminó este soliloquio con una exclamación entre dientes, lanzó la colilla del último cigarro y, hundiendo las manos en los bolsillos, caminó más despacio entre los arbustos. Las palabras que pronunció no fueron precisamente una bendición.

Capítulo VII

Philip aparece de nuevo en escena

El día siguiente amaneció lluvioso, y la mañana era una de esas en las que los varones del vecindario que no tienen una ocupación imperiosa en su casa tienden a visitar largo rato a sus amistades femeninas. La lluvia, que no les ha impedido caminar o cabalgar en un sentido, sin duda se volverá tan intensa y, al mismo tiempo, faltará tan poco para que escampe que nada más que una franca disputa podrá abreviar la visita: no bastara con el desagrado latente. Y si se trata de enamorados, ¿qué puede ser más agradable —en Inglaterra— que una mañana lluviosa? El sol inglés no es de fiar: los sombreros no resultan del todo seguros; y, si uno se sienta en la hierba, puede terminar acatarrado. En cambio, la lluvia sí es de confianza. Se galopa bajo ésta cubierto con un impermeable y al poco se encuentra uno en su asiento favorito, un poco por encima o un poco por debajo del que ocupa su diosa (sucede lo mismo en el terreno metafísico, y por ese motivo se adora y se desprecia a un tiempo a las mujeres), con la satisfactoria confianza de que no habrá señoras de visita.

—Estoy segura de que esta mañana Stephen vendrá antes —anunció Lucy—. Siempre es así cuando llueve.

Maggie no contestó. Estaba enfadada con Stephen; empezaba a pensar que debería sentir desagrado por él; y, de no haber sido por la lluvia, aquella mañana habría ido a casa de la tía Glegg para evitar su presencia. Dadas las circunstancias, tenía que encontrar algún motivo para permanecer fuera de la habitación con su madre.

Pero Stephen no apareció más temprano y llegó otro visitante —un vecino más próximo— antes que él. Cuando Philip entró en la sala, tenía intención de inclinar levemente la cabeza ante Maggie con la sensación de que no debía traicionar el secreto de su amistad; pero cuando ella avanzó hacia él y le tendió la mano, adivinó de inmediato que se lo había confiado todo a Lucy. Ambos se sintieron confusos durante un momento, aunque Philip había dedicado varias horas a prepararse; pero como todas las personas que han pasado por la vida sin esperar gran comprensión de los demás, pocas veces perdía el control de sí mismo y evitaba, con un orgullo extremadamente sensible, cualquier gesto que delatara su emoción. Un poco más pálido, las ventanas de la nariz un poco más tensas al hablar y un timbre de voz más agudo eran las únicas señales —que a los desconocidos parecerían meras muestras de fría indiferencia— que, por lo general, indicaban que Philip vivía un intenso drama interno. Pero Maggie, cuya capacidad para ocultar las impresiones que sufría apenas era mayor que si hubiera estado hecha con las cuerdas de un instrumento musical, sintió que se le llenaban los ojos de lágrimas mientras se daban la mano en silencio. No eran lágrimas de dolor: tenían el mismo origen que las que vierten las mujeres y los niños cuando, tras encontrar protección, vuelven la vista hacia el peligro que los amenazaba. Pues si bien poco tiempo atrás Maggie pensaba que los reproches de Tom no eran del todo injustos, en este breve plazo de tiempo Philip se había convertido para ella en algo similar a una conciencia externa a la que podía correr en busca de ayuda y fortaleza. El afecto tierno y sereno que sentía por Philip —firmemente arraigado en la infancia y en los recuerdos de las largas charlas tranquilas que habían confirmado aquella primera tendencia instintiva—, así como el hecho de que Philip despertara en ella más piedad y cariño que vanidad u otras facetas egoístas de su carácter, parecían convertirlo ahora en una especie de recinto sagrado, un santuario en el que podía encontrar refugio frente a una influencia seductora a la que la mejor parte de sí misma debía resistir y que podía llevar consigo un terrible tumulto interno y una desdicha externa. Esta nueva percepción de su relación con Philip anulaba los inquietos escrúpulos que podría haber sentido ante el temor de sobrepasar en su relación un límite que Tom censurara, y le tendió la mano y sintió que se le

llenaban los ojos de lágrimas sin ninguna inhibición. La escena fue exactamente como Lucy había esperado y su tierno corazón se alegró de unir de nuevo a Philip y a Maggie; sin embargo, a pesar de lo mucho que apreciaba a Philip, no pudo evitar la sensación de que comprendía un poco que Tom sintiera rechazo ante el contraste entre ambos: especialmente tratándose de una persona tan prosaica como el primo Tom, poco aficionado a la poesía y a los cuentos de hadas. Lucy empezó a hablar en cuanto pudo para relajar la situación.

—Ha sido muy amable y bondadoso por su parte acudir tan pronto tras su llegada, de manera que lo perdono por huir de modo tan inoportuno sin comunicárselo a sus amigos —dijo Lucy con su linda voz de soprano, similar a los gorjeos con que conversan los pajarillos—. Venga a sentarse aquí —prosiguió, colocando la butaca que más le convenía— y verá que lo tratamos con clemencia.

—No gobernará nunca bien, señorita Deane —dijo Philip mientras se sentaba—, porque nadie se tomará nunca en serio su severidad. La gente cometerá todo tipo de delitos convencida de que usted será indulgente.

Lucy le replicó alegremente, pero Philip no oyó su respuesta porque se había vuelto hacia Maggie, que lo examinaba franca y afectuosamente, tal como hacemos con los amigos de los que llevamos largo tiempo alejados. ¡Qué momento el de su separación! Y Philip sentía como si hubiera sido la víspera. Era una sensación tan viva —acompañada de unos recuerdos tan intensos y detallados, de una evocación tan apasionada todo lo que se dijo y se vio en su última conversación— que con esa desconfianza y ese recelo que en los caracteres inseguros acompaña, de modo casi inevitable, a cualquier sentimiento intenso, creyó leer un cambio en la mirada y los modales de Maggie. Bastaba con que lo temiera y lo esperara para que, en ausencia de pruebas de lo contrario, lo asaltara ese pensamiento.

—Estoy disfrutando de unas espléndidas vacaciones, ¿no es cierto? —dijo Maggie—. Lucy es como mi hada madrina: me ha convertido de sirvienta en princesa en un santiamén. No hago más que mi gusto durante todo el día, y ella siempre averigua lo que deseo antes que yo misma lo sepa.

—Entonces, estoy seguro de que se siente muy feliz por tenerla consigo —dijo Philip—: seguro que para ella es mejor tenerla a usted que a una multitud de animalitos de compañía. Y usted ofrece buen aspecto, le sienta bien este cambio.

Esta conversación banal siguió durante un rato hasta que Lucy, decidida a ponerle fin, exclamó con bien fingida expresión de fastidio que había olvidado alguna cosa y salió rápidamente de la habitación.

Al instante, Maggie y Philip se inclinaron y las manos se unieron otra vez mientras se miraban con triste alegría, como dos amigos que se encuentran con motivo de alguna pena reciente.

—Le he dicho a mi hermano que quería verte, Philip, y le he pedido que me liberara de mi promesa, y ha accedido.

La impulsiva Maggie deseaba que Philip conociera de inmediato la posición que debían mantener ambos, pero se contuvo. Todo lo sucedido desde que habían hablado del amor que él sentía por ella era tan doloroso que no deseaba ser la primera en referirse a ello. Le parecía casi una ofensa para Philip mencionar siquiera a su hermano: su hermano, que lo había insultado. Pero Philip pensaba demasiado en Maggie para prestar atención a ningún otro detalle.

—Entonces, ¿podemos ser amigos, Maggie? ¿Nada lo impide ya?

—¿Tu padre no se opondrá? —preguntó Maggie, retirando la mano.

—No pienso abandonarte a menos que tú lo desees, Maggie —contestó Philip sonrojándose—. Ya te expliqué que en algunas cuestiones nunca estaré de acuerdo con él, y ésta es una de ellas.

—Así pues, nada impide que seamos amigos, Philip; que nos veamos y charlemos mientras estoy aquí, porque me marcharé pronto. Tengo intención de ocupar pronto otro empleo.

—¿Es inevitable, Maggie?

—Sí. No puedo quedarme aquí mucho tiempo. No me conviene, dada la vida que debo retomar. No puedo vivir dependiendo de otros. No puedo vivir con mi hermano, aunque sea muy bueno conmigo. Desearía ocuparse de mí, pero eso me resultaría insoportable.

Philip permaneció en silencio durante unos instantes y después dijo con la voz aguda y débil que indicaba en él una emoción firmemente reprimida.

—¿Y no hay alternativa, Maggie? ¿Es esa vida lejos de los que te quieren lo único que te permites desear?

—Sí, Philip —contestó con mirada suplicante, como si le rogara que creyera que se veía obligada a seguir aquel camino—. Por lo menos, tal como están ahora las cosas. No sé qué podrá suceder en los años venideros, pero empiezo a pensar que el amor no me dará mucha felicidad: siempre lo he vivido junto con las penas. Me gustaría construirme un mundo al margen del amor, como hacen los hombres.

—Maggie, estás volviendo a las viejas ideas con una forma nueva, a esos pensamientos que yo rechazaba —señaló Philip con cierta amargura. Quieres encontrar un modo de renuncia que te permita huir del dolor. Te digo de nuevo que no es posible escapar, como no sea pervirtiendo o mutilando la propia naturaleza. ¿Qué sería de mí si intentara escapar del dolor? El desdén y el cinismo serían mi único opio, a menos que pudiera caer en algún tipo de locura engreída y creerme favorito del cielo, ya que no lo soy de los hombres.

A medida que hablaba, la amargura de Philip iba haciéndose más impetuosa: sin duda, las palabras eran una vía de escape para algún sentimiento escondido, al tiempo que una respuesta para Maggie. En aquel momento, algún pesar lo atenazaba. Se abstuvo con orgullosa delicadeza de aludir a las palabras de amor —promesas de amor— que habían pronunciado en otros tiempos. Le habría parecido que era como recordarle a Maggie un juramento y que habría tenido, en cierto modo, la vileza de una coacción. No podía insistir en el hecho de que él no había cambiado, porque aquello también habría parecido una súplica. El amor que sentía por Maggie estaba marcado, incluso más que el resto de su experiencia, por la exagerada sensación de que él era una excepción; de que ella, todos, lo veían como una excepción.

Pero Maggie estaba conmovida.

—Sí, Philip —contestó con la contrición infantil que adoptaba cuando él la reprendía—. Sé que tienes razón. Siempre pienso demasiado en mis sentimientos y demasiado poco en los de los demás; pienso poco en los tuyos. Necesitaba tenerte para que me encontraras defectos y me enseñaras… muchas de las cosas que me decías han resultado ser ciertas.

Mientras hablaba, Maggie tenía el codo apoyado sobre la mesa, descansaba la cabeza en la mano y miraba a Philip con actitud afectuosa y sumisa, al tiempo que algo contrita; él le devolvió la mirada con una expresión que a Maggie fue pareciéndole gradualmente menos vaga y le trajo a la mente un recuerdo concreto. ¿Acaso recordaba Philip lo mismo que ella? ¿Algo relacionado con un enamorado de Lucy? Maggie se estremeció al pensarlo: ilustraba con mayor claridad su situación actual y la tendencia de lo sucedido la tarde anterior. Maggie retiró el brazo de la mesa, empujada a cambiar de posición por la opresión física que algunas veces acompaña a una punzada repentina en la conciencia.

—¿Qué pasa, Maggie? ¿Ha sucedido algo? —preguntó Philip con una ansiedad indescriptible. Su imaginación estaba presta a tejer cualquier historia fatal para ambos.

—No, nada —contestó Maggie con un esfuerzo de voluntad. Philip no debía albergar en su mente un pensamiento tan odioso: ella misma lo borraría de la suya—. Nada —repitió—; sólo pasa en mi cabeza. Antes me decías que acabaría sintiendo los efectos de aquella vida hambrienta de todo, como tú la llamabas, y así es. Ahora que los tengo a mi alcance, ansío en exceso el lujo y la música.

Tomó de nuevo la labor y se dedicó a ella con decisión mientras Philip la contemplaba, sin saber si había dicho todo lo que pensaba. Era propio del carácter de Maggie agitarse por vagos reproches que se hacía a sí misma. No tardó en oírse en la puerta una llamada fuerte y familiar que resonó por toda la casa.

—¡Oh, qué susto! —exclamó Maggie, bastante dueña de sí misma, aunque estremeciéndose en su interior—. Me pregunto dónde estará Lucy.

Lucy no había sido sorda a la señal y, tras un intervalo lo bastante largo para responder a unas cuantas preguntas solícitas pero poco apresuradas, hizo entrar a Stephen.

—¡Hola, muchacho! —dijo, dirigiéndose directamente a Philip y estrechándole la mano efusivamente, tras lo cual se inclinó levemente ante Maggie al pasar—. Me alegro muchísimo de que estés otra vez de regreso, aunque desearía que no te comportaras como un gorrión con residencia en el alero y no entraras y salieras constantemente de tu casa sin

comunicárselo a los criados. He tenido que trepar para nada por esas incontables escaleras una veintena de veces en dirección a ese estudio tuyo de pintura, porque el servicio creía que estabas en casa. Incidentes como ésos amargan la amistad.

—Tengo tan pocas visitas que no parece necesario comunicar mis entradas y salidas —contestó Philip, sintiéndose súbitamente oprimido por la fuerte voz y la imponente presencia de Stephen.

—¿Está usted bien esta mañana, señorita Tulliver? —preguntó Stephen volviéndose hacia Maggie con rígida cortesía y tendiéndole la mano con expresión de estar cumpliendo con un deber social.

Maggie le tendió la punta de los dedos.

—Muy bien, gracias —contestó Maggie en tono de orgullosa indiferencia.

Los ojos de Philip los observaban atentamente; pero Lucy estaba acostumbrada a ver variaciones en su relación y se limitó a pensar con tristeza que existía entre ambos una antipatía natural que de vez en cuando se imponía sobre la buena voluntad recíproca. «Maggie no es del tipo de mujer que Stephen admira, y a ella le irrita un rasgo suyo que interpreta como engreimient», era la silenciosa observación que todo lo explicaba para la cándida Lucy. En cuanto Stephen y Maggie hubieron intercambiado ese poco espontáneo saludo, ambos se sintieron heridos por la frialdad del otro. Y Stephen, mientras seguía preguntando a Philip sobre su reciente viaje para dibujar, no dejaba de pensar en Maggie, porque no era capaz de arrastrarla a la conversación, como había hecho siempre antes. «Maggie y Philip no parecen felices —pensó Lucy—. Quizá esta primera entrevista los ha entristecid».

—Creo que a los que no hemos galopado, esta lluvia nos ha dejado un poco fríos —dijo Lucy a Stephen—. Vamos a animarnos con algo de música. Deberíamos aprovechar que Philip y usted están juntos. Canten el dúo de *Masaniello*: Maggie no lo ha oído y sé que será de su gusto.

—Adelante, entonces —dijo Stephen, dirigiéndose hacia el piano y ofreciendo un agradable anticipo tarareando la melodía con voz grave.

—Por favor, Philip, ¿quiere tocar el acompañamiento? —dijo Lucy—. Así puedo seguir trabajando. Le apetece tocar, ¿verdad? —añadió con una

linda mirada interrogadora e inquieta, como siempre preocupada de que su ruego no fuera del agrado de los demás pero deseosa de regresar al bordado inacabado.

Philip se animó con la propuesta, porque no hay sentimiento, tal vez con la única excepción del temor y la pena extremos, que no encuentre alivio en la música y que no haga que un hombre cante o toque mejor; y Philip, en aquellos momentos, reprimía sentimientos tan complejos como cualquier trío o cuarteto jamás escrito para expresar a un tiempo el amor, los celos, la resignación y las sospechas.

—Oh, sí —dijo, sentándose al piano—. Es una buena manera de extender la vida imperfecta de cada uno y ser tres personas a la vez: cantar, hacer que cante el piano y, mientras tanto, oírlos. O bien cantar y pintar.

Ah, es usted digno de envidia. Yo no soy capaz de hacer nada con las manos —dijo Stephen—. Me parece que es característica que se da en hombres de gran capacidad administradora. ¡Así que poseo una tendencia al predominio de la capacidad de reflexión! ¿Lo había advertido, señorita Tulliver?

Stephen, por error, cayó en la costumbre de bromear con Maggie, y ésta no pudo reprimir una respuesta rápida a modo de epigrama.

—Efectivamente, había observado esa tendencia suya al predominio —dijo sonriendo, y en ese momento Philip deseó fervientemente que dicha tendencia le resultara desagradable.

—Vamos, vamos —intervino Lucy—. ¡Música, música! Ya hablaremos de nuestras cualidades en otra ocasión.

Maggie intentaba siempre en vano seguir con su trabajo cuando empezaba la música. Ese día se aplicó con mayor esfuerzo, porque la conciencia de que Stephen sabía lo mucho que le gustaba oírlo cantar ya no provocaba en ella una resistencia meramente traviesa, y también sabía que tenía por costumbre colocarse de modo que pudiera mirarla. Pero no lo consiguió: no tardó en soltar la labor y todo su empeño se perdió en la difusa emoción que le producía el estimulante dúo, emoción que, a un tiempo, parecía debilitarla y fortalecerla: se sentía más fuerte para la dicha y más débil para la resistencia. Cuando la melodía pasó a un tono menor, la emoción del cambio casi hizo que se sobresaltara. ¡Pobre Maggie! Parecía

muy hermosa cuando el inexorable poder del sonido le hacía vibrar el alma de aquel modo. Un observador habría advertido en ella el menor estremecimiento, inclinada hacia delante, con las manos unidas como en un intento de tranquilizarse, con los ojos dilatados y brillantes, con la expresión infantil de asombrado deleite que siempre regresaba cuando se sentía más feliz. Lucy, que en ocasiones anteriores tocaba el piano mientras Maggie los miraba así, no pudo resistir el impulso de acercarse a ella sigilosamente y darle un beso. A través del libro abierto sobre el atril, Philip la entreveía de vez en cuando y advirtió que nunca la había visto tan emocionada.

—¡Otra, otra! —exclamó Lucy después de que les hicieran repetir el dúo—. Otra pieza animada, Maggie siempre dice que le gustan los torrentes de sonido.

—Entonces, cantemos *Vayamos por el camino* —dijo Stephen—, que resulta muy adecuado para una mañana lluviosa. Pero ¿está usted dispuesta para abandonar los más sagrados deberes de la vida y venir a cantar con nosotros?

—Claro que sí —contestó Lucy riendo—, si busca usted la *Ópera del mendi*go en el musiquero: tiene la cubierta deslucida.

—Valiosa pista, si tenemos en cuenta que aquí hay una veintena de cubiertas que rivalizan en aspecto roñoso —dijo Stephen, tirando del musiquero.

—Oh, Philip, toque algo mientras tanto —rogó Lucy, advirtiendo que los dedos de éste jugueteaban con las teclas—. ¿Qué es eso que toca? Es algo delicioso que no conozco.

—¿No lo conoce? —preguntó Philip, tocando la melodía con mayor claridad—. Es de *La sonámbula*: «Ah, perché non posso odiart». No conozco la ópera pero, al parecer, el tenor le dice a la protagonista que siempre la amará aunque ella lo abandone. Me ha oído cantar en inglés «Todavía te quier».

No era casual que Philip canturreara esa canción, que podía ser una expresión indirecta de lo que no se atrevía a decirle directamente a Maggie. Ésta lo escuchaba y, cuando empezó a cantar, comprendió la lastimera pasión de la música. Aquel suplicante tenor no poseía una voz

extraordinaria, pero ésta no era nueva para ella: le había cantado fragmentos con voz queda entre las hondonadas y los caminos cubiertos de hierba, bajo el sauce inclinado de las Fosas Rojas. Las palabras parecían contener cierto reproche, ¿era ésa la intención de Philip? Maggie deseó haberle asegurado con mayor claridad en su conversación que no deseaba renovar la esperanza de amor entre ambos únicamente porque era incompatible con sus circunstancias inevitables. Más que emocionada, se sintió conmovida: le evocaba recuerdos y pensamientos y, en lugar de animación, le producía pesar.

—Eso es lo que pasa con los tenores —dijo Stephen, que esperaba con el libro de música en la mano a que Philip terminara la canción—: desmoralizáis al bello sexo trinando vuestra fidelidad y vuestro amor sentimental mientras soportáis todo tipo de trato injusto. La única manera de impedir que expreséis vuestra total resignación sería presentando vuestra cabeza en un plato como aquel tenor o trovador medieval. Debo administrarles un antídoto mientras la señorita Deane se prepara para separarse de sus carretes.

—«¿Acaso debo morir / por la belleza de una mujer?». —Cantó Stephen con descarada energía y pareció contagiar de alegría a toda la habitación. Lucy, siempre orgullosa de lo que hacía Stephen, se dirigió hacia el piano mientras reía y lo miraba con admiración; y Maggie, a pesar de que se resistía ante el espíritu del cantante y de la canción, se sintió atrapada y afectada por la influencia invisible, arrastrada por una oleada demasiado fuerte para ella.

Sin embargo, irritada y decidida a no traicionarse, tomó la labor y siguió dando malas puntadas y pinchándose los dedos con gran perseverancia, sin levantar la vista ni prestar atención a lo que sucedía, hasta que las tres voces se unieron para cantar *Vayamos por el camino*.

Me temo que Maggie habría sentido una gratificación sutil y furtiva si hubiera sabido hasta qué punto el descarado y desafiante Stephen le prestaba atención, cómo pasaba rápidamente de la decisión de tratarla con ostentosa indiferencia a un irritante deseo de advertir alguna señal de atención por parte de ella, de cruzar con ella alguna mirada o alguna palabra. No tardó mucho Stephen en encontrar una oportunidad cuando

pasaron a la música de *La tempestad*. Maggie, tras advertir que necesitaba una banqueta para los pies, cruzó la habitación para buscarla. Stephen, que en aquel momento no estaba cantando y prestaba atención a todos sus movimientos, adivinó su deseo y se precipitó a complacerlo, lo que hizo inevitable que le lanzara una mirada de gratitud. Que un personaje tan seguro de sí mismo, y no uno cualquiera, sino uno en concreto, con una mirada repentinamente humilde y atenta, coloque con cuidado una banqueta; que se demore inclinado para preguntar si está cómoda la interesada, entre la ventana y la chimenea, y si no le molesta la corriente de aire, y si quiere que le traiga la mesita de labor, provoca cierta ternura, demasiado presta y traidora, en los ojos de una mujer que se ve obligada, en plena juventud, a aprender las lecciones de la vida en un lenguaje trivial. Y para Maggie estos gestos no pertenecían a su vida cotidiana, sino que eran un elemento nuevo en su vida y encontraban intacto el deseo de homenaje. Ese tono de amable solicitud la obligó a mirar el rostro inclinado hacia ella.

—No, gracias —contestó, y nada pudo impedir que aquella mirada resultara deliciosa para ambos, como la tarde anterior.

Para Stephen, aquello fue un gesto de cortesía que le tomó poco más de dos minutos; y Lucy, que estaba cantando, apenas lo advirtió. Sin embargo, para Philip, preso ya de una vaga inquietud que tendía a asentarse en cualquier hecho trivial, aquella repentina solicitud de Stephen y el cambio de expresión del rostro de Maggie, que sin duda respondía a la sonrisa de Stephen, le pareció un contraste tan vivo con los exagerados signos previos de indiferencia que resultaba lleno de significado. La voz de Stephen al cantar de nuevo le crispó los nervios, como el golpe de una plancha de hierro, y sintió deseos de hacer que el piano chirriara con disonancias. En realidad, no había visto nada que le hiciera sospechar que existiera entre Maggie y Stephen un sentimiento insólito; eso le decía la razón y deseaba marcharse a su casa de inmediato para poder reflexionar fríamente sobre aquellas imágenes falsas hasta convencerse de su falta de sentido. Pero, por otro lado, deseaba permanecer allí tanto tiempo como Stephen y estar siempre presente cuando él estuviera con Maggie. ¡Tan natural, tan inevitable le parecía a Philip que cualquier hombre que se encontrara cerca de Maggie se enamorara de ella! Y, si caía cautivada por Stephen Guest,

Maggie no tendría ninguna perspectiva de felicidad. Esa idea envalentonó a Philip y le hizo pensar que, en cambio, su amor por ella resultaba menos desigual. El tumulto ensordecedor que se desarrollaba en su interior le hacía tocar una nota falsa tras otra; y Lucy lo miraba asombrada cuando la entrada de la señora Tulliver para llamarlos a comer les ofreció una buena excusa para interrumpir la música.

—¡Ah, Philip! —saludó el señor Deane cuando entraron en el comedor —. Hacía tiempo que no lo veía. Me parece que su padre no está en casa, ¿no es cierto? El otro día fui a buscarlo a su despacho y me dijeron que estaba fuera de la ciudad.

—Ha ido a pasar varios días a Mudport por asuntos de negocios, pero ya ha regresado —contestó Philip.

—¿Y sigue con esa afición suya a la agricultura?

—Eso creo —contestó Philip, bastante asombrado por el repentino interés por los pasatiempos de su padre.

—¡Ah! —exclamó el señor Deane—, y creo que posee tierras a ambos lados del río, ¿verdad?

—Sí, así es.

—¡Ah! La agricultura debe de parecerle un asunto pesado y un caro pasatiempo —prosiguió el señor Deane mientras servía la empanada de pichón—. Yo nunca he tenido un pasatiempo, nunca he cedido a esa tentación. Y las peores aficiones son aquellas de las que la gente cree que puede sacar dinero: entonces lo tiran como quien lanza grano de un saco.

Lucy se puso bastante nerviosa ante aquellas críticas, aparentemente gratuitas, a los gastos del señor Wakem. Pero cesaron allí y el señor Deane pasó el resto del almuerzo inusualmente silencioso y meditabundo. Lucy, acostumbrada a observar atentamente a su padre y con motivos, recientemente acrecentados, para sentir un interés añadido por todo lo que se refiriera a los Wakem, sintió una curiosidad inusual por saber qué era lo que había motivado las preguntas de su padre. Su silencio posterior le hacía sospechar que lo había empujado algún motivo especial.

Con esta idea en la cabeza, recurrió al plan habitual cuando deseaba decir o preguntar a su padre algo en concreto: encontró algún motivo para que la tía Tulliver saliera del comedor después de comer y se sentó en un

escabel, junto a las rodillas de su padre. En estas circunstancias, el señor Deane pensaba que estaba degustando algunos de los momentos más agradables de esta vida, conseguidos gracias a sus méritos, a pesar de que Lucy, a la que no le gustaba tener la cabeza cubierta de rapé, por lo general empezaba apoderándose de la cajita.

—No quiere usted dormir, ¿verdad, papá? —dijo mientras acercaba el taburete y abría los gruesos dedos que agarraban la caja de rapé.

—Todavía no —dijo el señor Deane, echando una ojeada a la recompensa al mérito que le aguardaba en la licorera—. Pero ¿qué quieres? —añadió, pellizcando con cariño la barbilla con hoyuelo de Lucy—. ¿Quieres convencerme para que me saque del bolsillo algún otro soberano para tu venta benéfica?

—No, hoy no me empuja ningún motivo innoble, no quería pedirle nada, sólo hablar. Quería saber por qué le ha preguntado a Philip Wakem sobre la afición de su padre a la agricultura. Era bastante raro, porque casi nunca de dice nada sobre su padre. ¿Y por qué iba a importarle que el señor Wakem perdiera dinero con sus aficiones?

—Es algo que tiene que ver con mis negocios —contestó el señor Deane agitando las manos como si quisiera rechazar la intromisión en ese misterio.

—Pero, papá, si usted siempre dice que el señor Wakem ha educado a Philip como si fuera una chica, ¿cómo se le ha ocurrido pensar que podría enterarse de algo a través de él? Estas preguntas tan bruscas han sido un poco extrañas. A Philip le han parecido raras.

—¡Tonterías, niña! —protestó el señor Deane, intentando justificar un comportamiento que tanto de había costado pulir en su ascenso social—. Se sabe que el molino y la granja de Wakem que están al otro lado del río, el molino de Dorlcote de tu tío Tulliver, ya sabes, no marchan tan bien como antes. Quería saber si tu amigo Philip decía algo de que su padre estuviera cansado de dedicarse a la agricultura.

—¿Por qué? ¿Compraría usted el molino, papá, si quisiera desprenderse de él? —preguntó Lucy ansiosa—. Oh, cuéntemelo todo. Tome, aquí tiene la caja de rapé si me lo cuenta. Porque Maggie dice que todos tienen puestas sus esperanzas en que Tom recupere el molino alguna vez. Era una

de las últimas cosas que le dijo a Tom su padre, que debía recuperar el molino.

—Calla, niña —dijo el señor Deane, haciendo uso de la recuperada caja de rapé—. No debes decir ni una palabra de todo esto, ¿me oyes? Tienen muy pocas posibilidades de conseguir el molino; es difícil que nadie se lo quite a Wakem. Y si supiera que lo queremos para que los Tulliver lo vuelvan a tener, todavía sería más difícil que se desprendiera de él, después de todo lo que sucedió. Se comportó con Tulliver razonablemente bien, pero no se dan dulces a cambio de latigazos.

—Mire, papá —dijo Lucy con aire solemne—. ¿Quiere usted confiar en mí? No me pregunte los motivos que tengo para lo que voy a decirle, pero son poderosos. Y soy muy prudente, de verdad.

—Bien, dime.

—Pues creo que si me permitiera confiarle el secreto a Philip Wakem, contarle su deseo de comprar el molino con la intención de que lo tengan mis primos y por qué quieren tenerlo, creo que Philip nos ayudaría a conseguirlo. Sé que querrá ayudarnos.

—No sé por qué habría de hacerlo, hija. ¿Por qué iba a importarle precisamente a él? —dijo el señor Deane con aire desconcertado. De repente, lanzó una mirada penetrante a su hija—. No creerás que el pobre chico está encariñado contigo y por ello puedes hacer con él lo que quieras, ¿verdad? —En cambio, el señor Deane no albergaba dudas sobre los afectos de su hija.

—No, papá; se interesa poco por mí, ni siquiera tanto como yo por él. Pero tengo una razón para estar segura de lo que digo. No me pregunte usted. Y si lo adivina, no me lo diga. Limítese a dejarme hacer.

Lucy se levantó del escabel para sentarse sobre las rodillas de su padre y besarlo con este último ruego.

—¿Estás segura de que no vas a enredarlo todo? —preguntó él, mirándola con enorme cariño.

—Sí, papá, estoy segura. Soy muy lista, he heredado su talento para los negocios. ¿No admiró mi libro de cuentas cuando se lo enseñé?

—Bueno, bueno, si ese joven se mantiene callado no pasará nada grave. Y, la verdad, no creo que tengamos muchas oportunidades de otro modo.

Ahora déjame dormir.

Capítulo VIII

Wakem bajo una nueva luz

Antes de que hubieran transcurrido tres días tras la conversación entre Lucy y su padre que el lector acaba de presenciar, ésta había conseguido hablar en privado con Philip después de acordar que Maggie fuera a ver a la tía Glegg. Durante un día y una noche, Philip dio vueltas y vueltas a lo que de había contado Lucy hasta que decidió cuál era el camino más adecuado. Le pareció que veía ante él una posibilidad de cambiar su posición en relación con Maggie y eliminar, al menos, un obstáculo entre ambos. Trazó un plan y calculó todos los movimientos, con la apasionada minuciosidad de un entusiasta jugador de ajedrez, y se sorprendió de su súbito talento como estratega. Su plan era tan osado como cuidadoso, de modo que en cuanto vio que su padre no tenía nada más urgente entre manos que el periódico, se inclinó hacia él y de puso una mano en el hombro.

—Padre, ¿querría usted subir a mi sanctasanctórum y mirar dos últimos dibujos que he hecho? Ya los tengo listos.

—Phil, ya sabes que me duelen demasiado las articulaciones para subir todas esas escaleras —contestó Wakem, mirando con afecto a su hijo mientras dejaba el periódico—. Pero bueno, vamos.

—Es un lugar agradable, ¿verdad, Phil? Entra una luz magnífica desde el tejado —dijo, como siempre, en cuanto entró en el estudio. Le gustaba recordar a su hijo y a sí mismo que su indulgencia paternal le había preparado aquel lugar. Había sido un buen padre. Emily no podría reprocharle nada en ese aspecto, si saliera de la tumba—. Vamos, vamos —

dijo poniéndose las lentes sobre da nariz y sentándose para tener una visión general mientras descansaba—. Tienes aquí una estupenda exposición. Palabra que no sé por qué tus obras no son tan buenas como las de ese artista de Londres, ese comosellame, por el que Leyburn pagó tanto dinero.

Philip negó con la cabeza y sonrió. Se había sentado en el taburete que utilizaba para pintar y había tomado un lápiz, con el que trazaba fuertes señales para intentar contrarrestar la sensación de temblor. Observó que su padre se levantaba y caminaba despacio, entreteniéndose afablemente en cada cuadro más de lo que su afición a los paisajes le habría inducido, hasta que se detuvo ante un caballete en el que había dos cuadros, uno mayor que el otro, y el pequeño guardado en un estuche de cuero.

—¡Vaya! ¿Y qué tienes aquí? —preguntó Wakem, sobresaltado por la repentina transición del paisaje al retrato—. Pensaba que ya no pintabas retratos. ¿Quiénes son?

—Es la misma persona con distinta edad —se apresuró a contestar Philip con calma.

—¿Y de qué persona se trata? —preguntó Wakem bruscamente, clavando los ojos con recelo en el retrato, más grande.

—Es la señorita Tulliver. En el retrato pequeño aparece más o menos como era cuando yo estudiaba en King's Lorton con su hermano: en el grande no guarda tanto parecido y corresponde al momento en que volví del extranjero.

Wakem se volvió enfurecido y con el rostro congestionado, dejó caer las lentes y miró a su hijo durante unos instantes con expresión furiosa, como si fuera a pegar al ser débil y osado que estaba sentado en el taburete. Sin embargo, se dejó caer de nuevo en el sillón y metió las manos en los bolsillos de los pantalones, sin dejar por ello de mirar airado a su hijo. Philip no le devolvió la mirada, sino que se quedó sentado contemplando la punta del lápiz.

—¿Y pretendes decir, entonces, que te has visto con ella desde que llegaste del extranjero? —preguntó finalmente Wakem con ese vano intento, al que nos empuja la ira, de castigar con las palabras y el tono, puesto que no nos está permitido golpear.

—Sí, la vi con frecuencia durante un año, antes de que muriera su padre. Nos veíamos a menudo en el bosquecillo ese que está cerca del molino de Dorlcote, las Fosas Rojas. La quiero muchísimo: nunca querré a otra mujer. He pensado en ella desde que era una niña.

—¡Adelante, caballero! ¿Y has tenido correspondencia con ella desde entonces?

—No. No le dije que la quería hasta antes de que nos separáramos y ella prometió a su hermano no volver a verme ni escribirme. No estoy seguro de que me quiera ni de que quiera casarse conmigo, pero si quisiera, si me amara lo suficiente, me casaría con ella.

—¿Y así me devuelves todas las atenciones que te he dedicado? —preguntó Wakem, palideciendo y temblando de rabia e impotencia ante la calma desafiante de Philip y su serenidad.

—No, padre —contestó Philip, mirándolo por primera vez—. No creo que devuelva nada. Ha sido conmigo un padre indulgente, pero siempre he pensado que se debía al afectuoso deseo de darme la felicidad que el destino me escatimaba; nunca creí que se tratara de una deuda que debiera pagar sacrificando todas las posibilidades que tengo de ser feliz para satisfacer unos sentimientos suyos que yo nunca podré compartir.

—Creo que, en un caso como éste, la mayoría de los hijos compartirían los sentimientos de su padre —dijo Wakem con amargura—. El padre de esa muchacha era un bruto loco e ignorante que estuvo a punto de matarme, toda la ciudad lo sabe. Y el hermano es igualmente insolente, aunque con un carácter más frío. Dices que prohibió a su hermana que te viera: pues es capaz de romperte todos los huesos si no le haces caso. Pero pareces haber tomado una decisión: supongo que habrás tenido en cuenta las consecuencias. Naturalmente, eres independiente, puedes casarte mañana mismo con esa chica si quieres: tienes veintiséis años, puedes tomar tu camino que yo seguiré el mío. No necesitamos volver a tratarnos.

Wakem se levantó y caminó hacia la puerta, pero algo lo retuvo y, en lugar de salir de la habitación, la recorrió de un lado a otro. Philip tardó en contestar y, cuando lo hizo, habló con un tono más incisivo y claro que nunca.

—No, no puedo casarme con la señorita Tulliver, suponiendo que ella me quisiera, si sólo cuento con mis recursos. No se me ha educado para ejercer ninguna profesión. No puedo ofrecerle, además de mi deformidad, mi pobreza.

—Ah, entonces, ahí sí que tienes un motivo incuestionable para seguir conmigo —dijo Wakem, todavía con amargura, aunque las últimas palabras de Philip le habían dolido y habían agitado un sentimiento con el que convivía desde hacía un cuarto de siglo. Se dejó caer de nuevo en el sillón.

—Esperaba esto —dijo Philip—. Sé que estas escenas suceden con frecuencia entre padre e hijo. Si yo fuera como otros hombres de mi edad, podría contestar a sus palabras de enfado con otras más airadas, podríamos pelearnos, me casaría con la mujer que amo y tendría la oportunidad de ser tan feliz como cualquier otro. Pero si le produjera alguna satisfacción aniquilar el objetivo de todo lo que ha hecho por mí, tiene una ventaja sobre muchos otros padres: puede privarme por completo de lo único que daría sentido a mi vida.

Philip hizo una pausa, pero su padre siguió en silencio.

—Sabe usted mejor que nadie qué otra satisfacción podría obtener y que nada tiene que ver con ese rencor ridículo digno de salvajes nómadas.

—¡Rencor ridículo! —exclamó Wakem—. ¿A qué te refieres? ¡Maldita sea! ¿Acaso un hombre debe recibir latigazos de un ser zafio y estarle agradecido? Además, ahí está ese diablo orgulloso y frío del hijo. Cuando se produjo la venta dijo una palabra que no olvidaré. Sería el mejor blanco que conozco para una bala, si el tipo mereciera el gasto.

—No me refiero al resentimiento contra ellos —dijo Philip, que tenía sus motivos para compartir el rencor hacia Tom—, aunque no merece la pena albergar deseos de venganza. Me refiero a que esa enemistad se extienda a una muchacha indefensa, demasiado sensata y bondadosa para compartir sus estrechos prejuicios. Ella nunca se ha mezclado con las peleas familiares.

—¿Y qué significa eso? Nadie se pregunta lo que hace una mujer, sino de dónde procede. Es degradante que pienses siquiera en casarte con la hija del viejo Tulliver.

Por primera vez durante todo el diálogo, Philip perdió cierto control de sí mismo y enrojeció de rabia.

—La señorita Tulliver posee una categoría que sólo los necios pueden adjudicar a la clase media —dijo con tono amargo y mordaz—: es una persona refinada de pies a cabeza y sus parientes, sean lo que sean, merecen todo el respeto por su honor y su integridad irreprochables. Todo Saint Ogg's diría que ella es superior a mí.

Wakem lanzó una feroz mirada de interrogación a su hijo, pero Philip no lo miraba y, al cabo de unos instantes, prosiguió para explicar sus últimas palabras.

—Encuentre una sola persona en Saint Ogg's que no le diga que sería una pena que una bella criatura como ella se casara con un ser lamentable como yo.

—¡Ella no! —exclamó Wakem, poniéndose en pie y olvidando toda consideración en un estallido de orgullo resentido, entre paternal y personal —. Para ella sería un matrimonio muy ventajoso. Cuando una muchacha quiere a un hombre, eso de las deformidades accidentales son tonterías.

—Pero en estas circunstancias, las muchachas no suelen enamorarse — dijo Philip.

—Entonces —contestó Wakem con cierta brutalidad, intentado recuperar su postura anterior—, si ella no te quiere, te podrías haber ahorrado la molestia de hablarme de ella y me podrías haber ahorrado la molestia de negarme a lo que no va a suceder.

Wakem se encaminó a la puerta con grandes pasos y, sin mirar atrás, cerró de un portazo.

Philip confiaba todavía en que lo sucedido no le impidiera conseguir de su padre lo que se había propuesto, pero la escena le había crispado los nervios, tan sensibles como los de una mujer. Decidió no bajar a cenar porque no se sentía capaz de volver a enfrentarse a su padre ese día.

Cuando no tenía invitados, Wakem acostumbraba a salir por la noche, incluso a horas tan tempranas como las siete y media; y puesto que era ya media tarde, Philip cerró con llave su habitación y salió a dar un largo paseo con la idea de no regresar hasta que su padre hubiera salido de casa. Se metió en un bote y bajó el río hasta llegar a uno de sus pueblos favoritos,

donde cenó y se entretuvo hasta que se hizo la hora de regresar. Nunca se había peleado con su padre y sentía el desagradable temor de que la disputa se prolongara durante semanas. Y durante ese tiempo, ¿qué era lo que no podría suceder? No se permitía pensar en el significado de aquella pregunta involuntaria. Pero si podía llegar a convertirse alguna vez en el novio oficial y reconocido de Maggie, los vagos temores tendrían menos fundamento. Subió de nuevo al estudio de pintura y se echó sobre el sillón con sensación de fatiga; miró las marinas con olas y rocas dispuestas a su alrededor hasta que cayó en un sueño en el que veía a Maggie deslizándose por una cascada verde, resbaladiza y brillante mientras él la miraba indefenso, hasta que lo despertó lo que le pareció un estruendo repentino y horrible.

Era la puerta que se abría y apenas habría dormido unos minutos porque no se advertía ningún cambio perceptible en la luz de la tarde. Entró su padre con un cigarro en la boca. Philip hizo un gesto para cederle el sillón.

—Quédate quieto, prefiero andar.

Recorrió la habitación con grandes pasos un par de veces hasta detenerse delante de Philip con una mano metida en el bolsillo lateral.

—Pero esta chica parece sentir algo por ti, Phil —dijo, como si su conversación no se hubiera interrumpido—; si no fuera así, no se habría visto contigo.

El corazón de Philip latía rápidamente y un repentino sonrojo recorrió su rostro como un reflejo. No le resultaba fácil hablar.

—En King's Lorton, cuando era niña, me tomó cierto cariño porque hice compañía a su hermano cuando se hirió en el pie. Conservó el recuerdo y pensaba en mí como un viejo amigo. Cuando nos vimos, no me consideraba su enamorado.

—Pero tú acabaste cortejándola, ¿qué dijo entonces? —preguntó Wakem, cogiendo el cigarro y caminando de un lado a otro.

—Entonces dijo que me quería.

—Caray, ¿qué más quieres? ¿Es una mujer frívola?

—Entonces era muy joven —explicó Philip, vacilando—. Me temo que apenas sabía lo que sentía. Quizá la larga separación y la idea de que algunos acontecimientos nos separan para siempre pueden haberla hecho cambiar.

—Pero ahora está en la ciudad, la he visto en la iglesia. ¿No has hablado con ella desde que regresaste?

—Sí, en casa del señor Deane, pero no he podido volver a declararme por varios motivos. Pero desaparecería un obstáculo si usted diera su consentimiento, si estuviera dispuesto a aceptarla como nuera.

Wakem permaneció en silencio un rato frente al retrato de Maggie.

—No es la clase de mujer que era tu madre, Phil —dijo finalmente—. La he visto en la iglesia, es más guapa que en el retrato. Vi que tiene unos ojos muy hermosos y buena figura, pero parece una mujer peligrosa y difícil de manejar.

—Es muy tierna y afectuosa, y muy sencilla. No se da aires ni utiliza las pequeñas tretas de otras mujeres.

—¿Sí? —preguntó Wakem. Después miró hacia su hijo—. Pero tu madre parecía más dulce, tenía el cabello castaño y ondulado, y unos ojos grises como los tuyos. No puedes recordarla bien. Siento muchísimo no tener un buen retrato suyo.

—Entonces, ¿no le alegraría que yo conociera esa clase de felicidad padre, que me endulzara la vida? Usted no tendrá en la vida otro lazo tan fuerte como el que empezó hace veintiocho años, cuando se casó con mi madre, y desde entonces no ha hecho más que estrecharlo.

—Ah, Phil. Eres la única persona que conoce lo mejor de mí mismo —exclamó Wakem, tirando la colilla del cigarro y tendiéndole la mano a su hijo—. Debemos mantenernos juntos, si es que somos capaces. Y ahora, ¿qué debo hacer? Baja conmigo y dímelo. ¿Debo ir a visitar a esa damisela de ojos oscuros?

Derribado así el muro que los separaba, Philip pudo hablar libremente con su padre de su relación con los Tulliver, del deseo de que recuperaran el molino y las tierras, y de que, como paso inmediato, quedaran en manos de Guest & Co. Pudo atreverse a ser persuasivo y apremiante, y su padre cedió más rápidamente de lo previsto.

—A mí no me interesa el molino —accedió finalmente con cierta irritación—. Últimamente me ha dado mucha guerra. Sólo quiero que me paguen las mejoras que he introducido. Pero con una condición: no quiero

tener tratos directos con el joven Tulliver. Si tú quieres tragártelo por su hermana, allá tú; pero no hay salsa que pueda hacer que yo lo trague.

Dejo al lector que imagine los agradables sentimientos con que Philip se encaminó al día siguiente a casa del señor Deane para comunicarles que el señor Wakem estaba dispuesto a iniciar las negociaciones, así como la expresión de triunfo de Lucy cuando preguntó a su padre si no había demostrado poseer una gran habilidad negociadora. El señor Deane quedó desconcertado y se preguntó cuál sería el secreto de los tejemanejes de los jóvenes. Pero para los hombres del talante del señor Deane, lo que sucede entre los jóvenes es tan ajeno a los asuntos de la vida como las actividades de los pájaros y de las mariposas, hasta que se demuestre que tienen un efecto maligno sobre los asuntos monetarios. Y, en aquel caso, el efecto parecía haber sido totalmente beneficioso.

Capítulo IX

La caridad se viste de gala

La carrera de Maggie como miembro admirado de la buena sociedad de Saint Ogg's culminó sin duda el día de la venta benéfica, cuando su belleza noble y sencilla, vestida en una flotante muselina blanca que, sospechamos, procedía del guardarropa de la tía Pullet, se distinguió de las mujeres más adornadas y convencionales que la rodeaban. Tal vez no advertimos hasta qué punto nuestra conducta social está hecha de gestos artificiales hasta que vemos a una persona a la vez sencilla y hermosa: porque sin belleza tendemos a considerar tosquedad la sencillez. Las señoritas Guest estaban demasiado educadas para emplear las muecas y el tono afectado que caracteriza a la vulgaridad con pretensiones; pero, dado que su puesto se encontraba junto al de Maggie, aquel día pareció obvio, por primera vez, que la señorita Guest mantenía la barbilla demasiado alta y que la señorita Laura hablaba y gesticulaba con deseos de impresionar.

Todas las personas bien vestidas de Saint Ogg's y de los alrededores se encontraban allí, y habría merecido la pena acudir incluso desde lejos para contemplar el hermoso y viejo Hall, con sus vigas vistas y las grandes puertas de dos batientes, también de roble, y la luz que, procedente de lo alto, caía sobre las multicolores prendas expuestas. Era un lugar pintoresco, con las paredes pintadas con anchas franjas desvaídas y algún animal heráldico, hirsuto y hocicudo, apreciados emblemas de la familia noble que en otros tiempos fuera propietaria de aquel caserón, convertido ahora en edificio municipal. Un gran arco, tallado en la parte superior de uno de los

muros, remataba un escenario de roble, tras el cual había una sala, donde se habían colocado plantas de invernadero y mesas con viandas: un lugar muy agradable para los caballeros dispuestos a pasar el rato y cambiar los apretujones de la sala por un punto de vista más amplio. En realidad, aquel edificio antiguo se adaptaba tan bien a aquel propósito moderno que hacía elegante la caridad y llevaba, a través de la vanidad, a compensar las carencias, que nadie podía entrar en la sala sin comentarlo en más de una ocasión. Cerca del gran arco situado sobre la orquesta se encontraba un mirador de piedra con vidrieras pintadas, una de las venerables incoherencias del antiguo Hall; allí cerca tenía Lucy su puesto, debido a las necesidades de algunos artículos sencillos de cuya venta se encargaba en representación de la señora Kenn. Maggie le había rogado que le permitiera sentarse en el extremo abierto del puesto para vender estos artículos en lugar de las alfombrillas de cuentas y otros productos elaborados de los que sabía pocas cosas. Pero los batines para caballero, que se encontraban entre sus mercancías, no tardaron en convertirse en objeto de atención e interés general, y provocaron una curiosidad tremenda en cuanto a su calidad y sus méritos, así como una firme decisión de verificarlos mediante la prueba, de modo que su puesto no tardó en destacarse sobre los demás. Las damas que poseían bienes propios para vender y no deseaban batines, advirtieron de inmediato la frivolidad y el mal gusto de la preferencia masculina por artículos que podría proporcionarles cualquier sastre; y es posible que la enfática y diversa atención que se centró sobre la señorita Tulliver, en esta ocasión pública, proyectara más tarde en muchos de los presentes una luz poderosa e inequívoca sobre su conducta. Sin duda, no mora en el pecho de las damas caritativas la rabia por la belleza desdeñada, sino que los errores de las personas que en algún momento han sido objeto de admiración se hacen más intensos por mero contraste y, además, el destacado lugar que ocupaba Maggie aquel día por primera vez ponía en evidencia ciertas características que más tarde se consideraron de cierta relevancia significativa. La mirada directa de la señorita Tulliver resultaba algo atrevida, y su belleza poseía ciertas características toscas que la situaban, en opinión de todos los jueces femeninos, muy por detrás de su prima, la señorita Deane; porque las damas de Saint Ogg’s habían renunciado ya por

completo, a favor de Lucy, a sus pretensiones de provocar la admiración del señor Guest.

En cuanto a la pequeña y dulce Lucy, su reciente y bienintencionado triunfo en relación con el molino y todos los cariñosos proyectos que imaginaba para Maggie y Philip contribuían a que estuviera muy animada, y no le proporcionaba más que placer la evidencia del atractivo de Maggie. Sin duda, ella también estaba encantadora, y en aquel acto público Stephen le prestaba toda la atención, comprando celosamente todos los artículos que había visto elaborar por sus manos y ayudando alegremente a engatusar a todos los clientes masculinos para que adquirieran las más afeminadas futilidades. Decidió dejar el sombrero y ponerse un fez escarlata bordado por ella, aunque los observadores superficiales no lo consideraron tanto un cumplido hacia Lucy como una señal de fatuidad. «Guest es un fatuo —señaló el joven Torry—, pero en Saint Ogg's es una persona privilegiada y todo el mundo le sigue la corriente: si otro hiciera lo mismo que él, todo el mundo diría que estaba haciendo el ridícul». (El joven Torry era pelirrojo).

Y Stephen no compró nada del puesto de Maggie hasta que Lucy le dijo en tono bajo y ofendido:

—Mire, todo lo que ha tejido Maggie está a punto de venderse y usted no habrá comprado nada. Tiene esas cosas tan deliciosamente suaves para calentar las muñecas, cómpreselas.

—¡Oh, no! —dijo Stephen—. Deben de estar pensadas para personas imaginativas que en un día cálido como éste se hielan si piensan en el helado Cáucaso. Ya sabe usted que yo soy más severo. Convenza usted a Philip de que los compre. Por cierto, ¿por qué no ha venido?

—No le gusta ir a lugares donde hay demasiada gente, aunque le encarecí que viniera. Me dijo que se quedaría con todo lo que los demás no quisieran. Pero ahora vaya a comprarle algo a Maggie.

—No, no. Mire, ahora tiene un cliente: el viejo Wakem acaba de llegar. Lucy volvió los ojos con interés e inquietud hacia Maggie para ver cómo se desenvolvía en aquel primer encuentro, desde un tiempo tristemente memorable, con un hombre hacia el que, probablemente, experimentaba una extraña mezcla de sentimientos, pero se alegró al comprobar que Wakem tenía tacto suficiente para ponerse a hablar de los géneros que se

vendían en la feria y parecer interesado en comprar algo mientras le dirigía alguna sonrisa amable, sin darle oportunidad de hablar demasiado, puesto que advertía que estaba pálida y temblorosa.

—Vaya, Wakem está resultando amable con su prima —dijo Stephen por lo bajo a Lucy—. ¿Acaso se debe a pura magnanimidad? Usted me contó algo de una pelea familiar.

—Oh, espero que no tarde en arreglarse —dijo Lucy, tan satisfecha que resultaba poco discreta, con aire de saber más del asunto. Sin embargo, Stephen no pareció reparar en su comentario y, puesto que se aproximaban algunas compradoras, fue acercándose hacia el rincón de Maggie. Toqueteó algunos objetos y se mantuvo a cierta distancia hasta que Wakem, que había sacado ya la cartera, terminó la transacción.

—Mi hijo ha venido conmigo —oyó que decía Wakem—, pero se ha esfumado en algún rincón del edificio y ha dejado para mí estas atenciones caritativas. Espero que le reproche su mala conducta.

Sin decir nada, ella le devolvió la sonrisa y la inclinación, y Wakem se dio la vuelta. Entonces vio a Stephen y lo saludó con un movimiento de cabeza. Maggie, consciente de que Stephen seguía allí, se entretuvo contando el dinero y evitó levantar la vista. Se había alegrado de que hubiera prestado atención sólo a Lucy y no se hubiera acercado a ella. Habían empezado el día con un saludo indiferente y ambos se habían sentido satisfechos de mantenerse alejados, como un paciente capaz de pasarse sin la dosis de opio a pesar de los fracasos previos. Y durante los últimos días incluso habían estado preparándose para los fracasos, meditando sobre los acontecimientos que pronto los separarían, motivo para prescindir de la conquista de sus propios sentimientos.

Stephen fue acercándose paso a paso, como si tiraran de él contra su voluntad, hasta que rodeó el extremo lateral del puesto y quedó medio escondido por una pantalla de colgaduras. Maggie siguió contando el dinero, hasta que de repente oyó una voz profunda y agradable.

—¿Está usted muy cansada? ¿Quiere que le traiga algo? ¿Un poco de fruta o jalea?

Aquel tono inesperado hizo que se estremeciera, como con la súbita vibración de un arpa a su lado.

—¡Oh, no, gracias! —dijo débilmente, alzando la vista unos instantes.

—Está usted muy pálida —insistió Stephen con tono solícito—. Estoy seguro de que está agotada. Voy a desobedecerla y le traeré algo.

—No, de veras que no podría tomarlo.

—¿Está usted enfadada? ¿Qué le he hecho? Haga el favor de mirarme.

—Le ruego que se vaya —dijo Maggie, mirándolo con expresión de impotencia. Enseguida desvió los ojos hacia el rincón opuesto del escenario, medio oculto por los pliegues del viejo telón verde. En cuanto pronunció ese ruego, Maggie se estremeció ante lo que implicaba, pero Stephen se dio la vuelta al instante y, siguiendo la mirada de Maggie, divisó a Philip Wakem sentado en el rincón escondido, de manera que apenas podía ver de la sala otra cosa que el lugar donde estaba Maggie. Un pensamiento totalmente nuevo asaltó a Stephen y, vinculándolo a lo que acababa de observar en los modales de Wakem y la respuesta de Lucy a su observación, se convenció de que había existido alguna relación previa entre Philip y Maggie, además de la amistad infantil mencionada. Abandonó la sala, empujado por más de un impulso, y subió las escaleras en dirección a la sala de descanso. Allí se dirigió hacia Philip, se sentó tras él y le puso la mano en el hombro.

—¿Estás estudiando para hacer un retrato, Phil? ¿O para dibujar el ventanal? Diantre, desde este rincón oscuro, enmarcado por el telón, resulta un fragmento interesante.

—He estado estudiando la expresión del rostro humano —contestó Philip, cortante.

—¿Cómo? ¿El de la señorita Tulliver? Hoy está de mal humor, me parece. Se siente como una princesa obligada a atender tras un mostrador. Su prima me mandó para que le ofreciera un refrigerio, pero, como siempre, me ha desdeñado. Supongo que entre ambos existe una antipatía natural, pocas veces tengo el honor de complacerla.

—¡Qué hipócrita eres! —exclamó Philip, enrojeciendo furioso.

—¿Cómo es eso? ¿La experiencia debería haberme enseñado que gusto a todo el mundo? Reconozco la universalidad de la ley, pero en este caso no se cumple.

—Me marcho —dijo Philip, levantándose bruscamente.

—Yo también, para tomar un poco de aire fresco. Este lugar es sofocante. Creo que ya he cumplido con creces.

Los dos amigos bajaron juntos sin hablar. Philip se encaminó hacia la puerta que daba sobre el cementerio, pero Stephen siguió pasillo adelante.

—Oh, por cierto, debo quedarme por aquí —dijo, y se encaminó hacia una de las salas situadas en el otro extremo del edificio, asignadas a la biblioteca de la ciudad.

No había nadie en la sala y eso es todo lo que necesita un hombre cuando lo único que desea es lanzar el sombrero sobre la mesa, sentarse a horcajadas en una silla y contemplar la alta pared de ladrillos con un ceño tan fruncido que habría sido digno de la ocasión si hubiera tenido que dar muerte a la gigantesca Pitón. La conducta que se deriva de un conflicto moral con frecuencia es tan semejante al vicio que el juicio externo, si se basa en una mera comparación de los actos, no percibe la diferencia. Espero que el lector advierta con claridad que Stephen no era hipócrita —capaz de actuar con deliberada doblez para conseguir un fin egoísta— y, sin embargo, la fluctuación entre el empeño sistemático en negar un sentimiento y el modo en que le daba rienda suelta podría haber servido de sólido argumento para la acusación de Philip.

Entre tanto, Maggie permanecía sentada en el puesto, fría y temblorosa, con la dolorosa sensación en los ojos que procede de unas lágrimas reprimidas con firmeza. ¿Acaso su vida sería siempre así? ¿Tendría que vivir siempre sometida a conflictos internos? Oía confusamente las voces ajetreadas e indiferentes a su alrededor y habría deseado que aquella corriente fácil y rumorosa arrastrara su pensamiento. En aquel momento, el doctor Kenn, que acababa de entrar en el salón y caminaba hacia el centro con las manos a la espalda mientras echaba un vistazo general, detuvo los ojos en Maggie por primera vez y se sorprendió ante la expresión de dolor de aquel bello rostro. Maggie estaba sentada e inmóvil, porque el flujo de clientes había disminuido a aquella hora tardía: los caballeros habían preferido pasar por ahí a mitad del día y el puesto de Maggie apenas tenía ya objetos que vender. Eso, junto con su expresión ausente y dolorosa, completaba el contraste entre ella y sus compañeras, animadas y atareadas. El doctor Kenn se sintió profundamente atraído. Como es natural, el rostro

de Maggie le había llamado la atención en la iglesia por ser nuevo y hermoso, y se la habían presentado durante una breve visita de trabajo a casa del señor Deane, pero no habían cruzado más de tres palabras. Caminó hacia ella y Maggie, advirtiendo que alguien se acercaba, se forzó a levantar la vista y prepararse para hablar. Sintió un alivio infantil e instintivo de la sensación de incomodidad provocada por el esfuerzo cuando vio que era el doctor Kenn quien la miraba: aquel rostro de mediana edad poco agraciado, de una amabilidad grave y penetrante, que parecía corresponder a un ser humano que, tras alcanzar una playa segura, observara con deseo de ayudar a quienes todavía combatían con las olas, tuvo sobre ella un efecto que recordaría más tarde como si hubiera sido una promesa. Las personas de mediana edad que han vivido ya las emociones más fuertes de su vida pero se encuentran en un momento en que la memoria todavía conserva algo de pasión y no es meramente contemplativa, pertenecen a una especie de sacerdocio natural formado y consagrado por la vida para ser refugio y socorro de los jóvenes que avanzan dando traspiés y para los que desesperan de sí mismos: casi todos nosotros, en algún momento de nuestra juventud, habríamos recibido con los brazos abiertos a un sacerdote de esta orden natural, canónica o no, y, en cambio, tuvimos que caminar a tientas, sin esa ayuda, como Maggie, a través de todas las dificultades de los diecinueve años.

—Me temo que este trabajo le resulta fatigante, señorita Tulliver —dijo el doctor Kenn.

—Lo cierto es que sí —contestó Maggie con sencillez, pues no estaba acostumbrada a negar con una sonrisa tonta los hechos evidentes.

—Sin embargo, podré decir a mi esposa que ha vendido sus objetos rápidamente —añadió—. Le estará muy agradecida.

—Oh, no he hecho nada: los caballeros se apresuraron a venir a comprar los batines y los chalecos bordados, pero creo que cualquiera de las otras damas presentes habría vendido más; yo no sabía qué decir sobre ellos.

—Espero que se quede y forme parte de mis parroquianos de manera definitiva, señorita Tulliver —dijo el doctor Kenn con una sonrisa—. Ya que hasta ahora, se ha mantenido lejos de nosotros.

—He sido maestra en un colegio y pronto iré a desempeñar otro trabajo similar.

—¿Ah, sí? Esperaba que se quedara entre sus familiares, que, según creo, viven todos por aquí.

—Oh, tengo que irme —contestó Maggie muy seria, mirando al doctor Kenn con expresión de confianza, como si le hubiera contado toda su historia con esas tres palabras.

Algunas veces, incluso en encuentros fugaces —durante un viaje o tal vez junto al camino— tiene lugar una revelación tácita. En algunas ocasiones, la mirada o las palabras de un desconocido nos hacen creer en la existencia de la fraternidad humana.

La vista y los oídos del doctor Kenn percibieron que esa breve confidencia de Maggie estaba cargada de significado.

—Entiendo —dijo—, le parece conveniente marcharse, pero espero que eso no impida que volvamos a vernos, que llegue a conocerla mejor, si puedo serle de alguna ayuda.

Le tendió la mano y estrechó la suya amablemente antes de alejarse. «Tiene alguna pena en el corazón —pensó—. Pobre criatura. Parece como si fuera una de esas "almas cuya naturaleza tanto eleva y cuyo sufrimiento tanto abate". Esos bellos ojos tienen una expresión extraordinariamente sincera».

Podría resultar sorprendente que Maggie, entre cuyas múltiples imperfecciones no se encontraba ausente el deseo excesivo de admiración y reconocimiento de sus méritos, en la misma medida que cuando quiso instruir a los gitanos con intención de ocupar un lugar regio entre ellos, no se sintiera más animada en un día en que había recibido el tributo de tantas miradas y sonrisas, junto con la satisfactoria conciencia que necesariamente debió sentir cuando la llevaron ante el espejo de cuerpo entero de Lucy para que se contemplara, alta y bella, coronada por la negra noche de su abundante cabello. En ese momento, Maggie se dirigió una sonrisa y durante un instante lo olvidó todo ante la conciencia de su belleza. Si ese estado de ánimo hubiera durado, habría optado por tener a Stephen Guest a sus pies ofreciéndole una vida llena de lujos, con el cotidiano incienso de la adoración próxima y lejana, con todas las posibilidades de la cultura al

alcance de la mano. Pero su carácter tenía otros rasgos más poderosos que la vanidad: la pasión, el afecto, los recuerdos antiguos de la disciplina y el esfuerzo, de lejanos sentimientos de amor y piedad: y una corriente más poderosa que nunca, empujada por los acontecimientos y los impulsos internos de la última semana, arrastró el arroyo de la vanidad y se mezcló con él hasta hacerlo desaparecer.

Philip no había contado a Maggie que su padre ya no suponía un obstáculo para la relación entre ambos —no se había atrevido—, pero se lo había explicado todo a Lucy con la esperanza de que Maggie, tras enterarse por ella, le diera alguna señal alentadora que sugiriera que le hacía feliz aquella reducción de la distancia que los separaba. Los sentimientos en conflicto fueron excesivos para que Maggie pudiera decir gran cosa cuando Lucy, con el rostro resplandeciente de alegría, como uno de los querubines de Correggio, le comunicó la noticia triunfal, y Lucy no se sorprendió de que no pudiera hacer otra cosa que llorar de alegría ante la idea de que el deseo de su padre se cumpliera y que Tom pudiera recuperar el molino como recompensa de sus esfuerzos. Durante los días siguientes, los detalles de la preparación de la venta benéfica acapararon la atención de Lucy y nada se dijeron las primas sobre unas cuestiones que afectaban a sentimientos tan profundos. Philip había ido a la casa en más de una ocasión, pero Maggie no sostuvo con él ninguna conversación en privado, de modo que había librado aquella batalla interna sin interferencias.

—Debes abandonar el plan de ir pasado mañana a pasar unos días con tu tía Moss, Maggie —dijo Lucy cuando las primas estuvieron solas de nuevo, descansando juntas en casa tras la venta benéfica—: escríbele una nota diciéndole que lo has aplazado a petición mía y enviaré a un criado con ella. No se disgustará, ya tendrás tiempo más tarde de ir a verla. Y no quiero que desaparezcas en este preciso momento.

—Tengo que irme, querida Lucy. No puedo retrasarlo ni quiero relegar a la tía Gritty. Y tengo muy poco tiempo, porque me iré al nuevo trabajo el veinticinco de junio.

—¡Maggie! —exclamó Lucy, casi blanca de asombro.

—No te lo había dicho porque has estado muy ocupada —dijo Maggie, haciendo un gran esfuerzo para dominarse—. Pero hace un tiempo escribí a

nuestra antigua institutriz, la señorita Firniss, para preguntarle si sabía de algún empleo que pudiera ocupar, y el otro día recibí una carta suya diciéndome que podía llevarme a la costa durante las vacaciones a tres de sus alumnas, huérfanas, y después pasar un periodo de prueba con ella como profesora. Ayer escribí aceptando la oferta.

Lucy se sintió tan herida que durante unos segundos fue incapaz de hablar.

—Maggie —dijo finalmente—. ¿Cómo has podido hacerme esto? Mira que no decírmelo… y tomar semejante decisión… ¡precisamente ahora! —Vaciló un poco y añadió—: ¿Y Philip? Yo creía que todo iba a ser tan feliz… ¡Oh, Maggie! ¿Por qué haces esto? Renuncia, deja que yo escriba la carta. Ahora ya no hay nada que pueda separaros a Philip y a ti.

—Sí —dijo Maggie débilmente—: están los sentimientos de Tom. Dijo que me olvidara de él si me casaba con Philip. Y sé que no cambiará, por lo menos, durante mucho tiempo, a no ser que suceda algo que lo aplaque.

—Pero hablaré con él, va a volver esta semana. Y la buena noticia sobre el molino lo calmará. Y también le hablaré de Philip. Tom siempre se muestra conmigo muy complaciente, a mí no me parece tan obstinado como dices.

—De todos modos, tengo que irme —repitió Maggie, abatida—. Tengo que dejar que pase cierto tiempo. No insistas en que me quede, querida Lucy.

Lucy permaneció en silencio durante unos minutos, reflexionando con la mirada perdida.

—Maggie, ¿es que no quieres a Philip lo suficiente para casarte con él? Dímelo, confía en mí —preguntó Lucy tras arrodillarse junto a su prima, mirándola a la cara con seria inquietud.

Maggie sostuvo las manos de Lucy en silencio durante un rato. Las suyas estaban muy frías. Pero cuando habló, su voz fue clara y nítida.

—Sí, Lucy. Me casaría con él. Creo que para mí no habría mejor destino que hacerlo feliz. Él me quiso antes que nadie. Nadie podría ser para mí lo que es él. Pero no puedo separarme para siempre de mi hermano. Tengo que marcharme y esperar. Y te ruego que no vuelvas a hablarme de eso nunca más.

Lucy obedeció, dolida y sorprendida.

—Bueno, querida Maggie —añadió—, por lo menos irás al baile de mañana en Park House y disfrutarás de un poco de música antes de irte a esa triste visita. ¡Ah, aquí está mi querida tía con el té!

Capítulo X

Parece romperse el hechizo

Las salas que se sucedían, una tras otra, en Park House, se mostraban debidamente brillantes, adornadas con luces y flores y el esplendor personal de dieciséis parejas acompañadas de sus padres y tutores. El lugar más resplandeciente era el largo salón, donde tenía lugar el baile, bajo la inspiración de un piano de cola; la biblioteca, abierta en un extremo, preparada para los juegos de cartas, disfrutaba de la iluminación más sobria de la madurez; y, al otro extremo, el lindo gabinete con un invernadero adosado quedaba como un posible retiro más fresco. Lucy, que había abandonado el luto por primera vez y lucía su linda figura envuelta en un abundante vestido de crespón blanco, era la reina oficial de la ocasión, porque aquélla era una de las fiestas condescendientes de las señoritas Guest, ya que no incluía a ningún miembro de una aristocracia superior a la de Saint Ogg's y ampliaba en lo posible el criterio de nobleza aplicado a comerciantes y profesionales.

Al principio, Maggie se negó a bailar con el pretexto de que había olvidado todos los pasos, tanto tiempo había transcurrido desde que bailaba en el colegio; y se alegró de tener esa excusa, porque es malo bailar con el corazón triste. Pero, al cabo de un rato, la música se le metió en las jóvenes piernas y le apeteció, aunque fue el horrible joven Torry quien apareció por segunda vez con intención de convencerla. Ella le advirtió que sólo sabía bailes tradicionales, pero él, naturalmente, estaba dispuesto a esperar tan alta felicidad y le aseguró en varias ocasiones, con la única intención de ser

amable, que «era un fastidi» que no supiera bailar el vals, ya que le habría gustado mucho bailarlo con ella. Pero finalmente llegó el momento de los bailes anticuados, los menos vanidosos y más divertidos, y Maggie casi olvidó su agitada vida disfrutando como una niña de aquel ritmo algo rústico que parece desterrar toda etiqueta pretenciosa. Se sentía generosa con el joven Torry, que le sostuvo la mano durante el baile; sus ojos y sus mejillas poseían el fuego de la joven alegría, capaz de arder al menor soplo; y el sencillo traje negro con un poco de encaje parecía el oscuro engarce de una piedra preciosa.

Stephen todavía no le había pedido que bailara con él, todavía no le había prestado más atención que la cortés. Desde el día anterior, la imagen de Maggie que tenía siempre presente estaba parcialmente oculta por la de Philip Wakem, que la cubría como una mancha: había alguna relación entre ella y Philip; por lo menos, por parte de él, y ella se sentía obligada. Stephen se decía que, en ese caso, otra razón de honor lo obligaba a resistir una atracción que continuamente amenazaba con dominarlo. Eso era lo que se decía: y, sin embargo, en un par de ocasiones había sentido una violenta resistencia y, en otras, una estremecedora repugnancia ante esta intromisión de la imagen de Philip, que casi contribuía a empujarlo hacia Maggie y reclamarla como suya. Con todo, aquella noche hacía lo que se había propuesto: hasta el momento se había mantenido lejos, casi no la había mirado y había atendido alegremente a Lucy. No obstante, en aquel instante devoraba a Maggie con los ojos y tenía tentaciones de echar al joven Torry del baile de una patada y ocupar su lugar. Deseó que terminara el baile para que ella pudiera librarse de su pareja. El deseo de bailar con Maggie y tener su mano entre las suyas durante tanto rato empezaba a apoderarse de él como una sed. Pero, aunque estaban lejos el uno del otro, sus manos se unían en el baile.

Stephen apenas advirtió lo que sucedía o de qué modo mecánico cumplía con los deberes de la cortesía hasta que quedó libre y volvió a ver a Maggie otra vez sentada y sola, en el extremo opuesto del salón. Se dirigió hacia ella, a través de las parejas que estaban formándose para el vals, y cuando Maggie se dio cuenta de que la estaba buscando, a pesar de todos sus pensamientos previos, sintió que se le alegraba el corazón. Todavía

tenía los ojos y las mejillas iluminadas con un entusiasmo infantil por el baile: todo su cuerpo estaba predispuesto a la alegría y a la ternura: ni siquiera los pesares futuros parecían amargos, estaba dispuesta a aceptarlos como parte de la vida, porque en aquel momento ésta le parecía una conciencia viva y vibrante posada sobre el placer o el dolor. En aquella última noche podía disfrutar sin trabas en la calidez del presente sin pensamientos gélidos sobre el pasado y el futuro.

—Van a tocar otro vals —dijo Stephen, inclinándose para hablar con ella, con esa mirada y ese tono de ternura contenida que los jóvenes sueños imaginan en los bosques en verano, cuando leves arrullos llenan el aire. Esas miradas y esos tonos llevan consigo un aliento poético a una sala sofocante debido a la iluminación del gas y a arduos flirteos.

—Van a tocar otro vals. Marea un poco mirar y hace mucho calor, ¿quiere que demos un paseo?

Le tomó la mano y se la colocó en el brazo, y se dirigieron hacia el gabinete, donde había unas mesas dispuestas con grabados para acomodar a unos visitantes poco interesados en mirarlos. Pero en aquel momento no había nadie. Pasaron al invernadero.

—Qué raros e irreales son los árboles y las flores entre luces —dijo Maggie con voz baja—. Se diría que pertenecen a una tierra encantada y que nunca se irán: no me costaría imaginar que están hechos con piedras preciosas.

Contemplaba una hilera de geranios mientras hablaba y Stephen no contestó; la estaba mirando. ¿Y acaso un poeta supremo no mezcla la luz y el sonido para llamar muda a la oscuridad y elocuente a la luz? Algo extrañamente poderoso había en la luz de la larga mirada de Stephen, porque hizo que el rostro de Maggie se volviera hacia él y se alzara: lentamente, como una flor sigue al astro que asciende. Y siguieron avanzando con paso vacilante, sin tener la sensación de estar andando, sin sentir otra cosa que la mirada larga y grave que poseía la solemnidad propia de toda pasión humana profunda. La conciencia de que debían y querían renunciar el uno al otro hacía aquel momento de confesión mutua todavía más intenso.

Pero llegaron al extremo del invernadero y tuvieron que detenerse y dar la vuelta. Maggie volvió en sí con el cambio: se sonrojó profundamente, movió la cabeza, soltó el brazo de Stephen y se acercó a unas flores para olerlas. Stephen permaneció inmóvil, todavía pálido.

—¡Oh! ¿Puedo coger esta rosa? —preguntó Maggie, haciendo un gran esfuerzo para decir algo y disipar la ardiente sensación de una confesión irremediable—. Me parece que soy un poco mala con las rosas: me gusta cogerlas y olerlas hasta que ya no tienen aroma.

Stephen estaba mudo: era incapaz de formar una frase y Maggie extendió el brazo hacia la gran rosa medio abierta que le había llamado la atención. ¿Quién no ha observado la belleza de un brazo femenino, las indecibles sugerencias de ternura de un codo con sus hoyuelos y de las curvas suaves que se atenúan hacia la delicada muñeca? Hace dos mil años, el brazo de una mujer conmovió a un gran escultor y construyó para el Partenón una imagen de éste que todavía nos emociona mientras abraza amorosamente el gastado mármol de un tronco decapitado. El brazo de Maggie era como aquél, pero poseía los cálidos tonos de la vida.

Un loco impulso se apoderó de Stephen; se precipitó hacia el brazo, lo asió por la muñeca y lo cubrió con una lluvia de besos.

Al instante Maggie se lo arrebató y miró a Stephen como una diosa de la guerra herida, temblando de rabia y humillación.

—¿Cómo se atreve? —exclamó con voz casi ahogada, profundamente alterada—. ¿Qué derecho le he dado para que me insulte?

Huyó de él hacia el gabinete contiguo y se echó en el sofá, jadeando y temblando.

Había sufrido un terrible castigo por el pecado de permitirse un momento de felicidad que traicionaba a Lucy, a Philip, a lo mejor de sí misma. Aquella felicidad momentánea había sufrido una plaga, una lepra: Stephen la tenía por una mujer más fácil que Lucy.

Stephen se apoyó contra la estructura del invernadero, aturdido por las pasiones en conflicto: amor, rabia y confusa desesperación ante su falta de dominio y por haber ofendido a Maggie.

Este último sentimiento superó a todos los demás: estar a su lado de nuevo y rogar que lo perdonara era lo único que tenía para él la fuerza de un

motivo, y apenas llevaba Maggie sentada unos pocos minutos cuando él se acercó y se detuvo ante ella con actitud humilde. Pero Maggie seguía furiosa.

—Haga el favor de dejarme sola —dijo con aire altivo e impetuoso—. Y, en el futuro, le ruego que no me busque.

Stephen dio media vuelta y caminó de un lado a otro en un extremo del gabinete. Empezaba a darse cuenta de que tenía que regresar al salón de baile cuanto antes y, cuando volvió, advirtió que habían estado fuera tan poco tiempo que el vals no había terminado.

Maggie tampoco tardó en regresar. Aguijoneado, su orgullo bullía frenético; finalmente, la odiosa debilidad que la había expuesto a aquella ofensa a su dignidad había generado su propia cura. Debía relegar todos los pensamientos y las tentaciones del último mes a un rincón perdido de la memoria: ahora ya no sentía ninguna atracción; le sería fácil cumplir con su deber y sus viejos y serenos propósitos se impondrían pacíficamente otra vez. Volvió a entrar en el salón todavía con el rostro brillante de excitación, pero con una sensación de orgulloso dominio que desafiaba toda agitación. No quiso bailar más, pero se mostró dispuesta a hablar tranquilamente con quienes le dirigieron la palabra. Y cuando se fueron a casa aquella noche, besó a Lucy con el corazón libre, casi feliz por el momento abrasador que la había liberado de la posibilidad de que otra palabra u otra mirada estuvieran marcadas con el sello de la traición hacia aquella hermana tierna y confiada.

A la mañana siguiente, Maggie no se encaminó hacia Basset tan temprano como tenía previsto. Su madre iba a acompañarla en el carruaje y la señora Tulliver no podía despachar el trabajo de la casa deprisa. De manera que Maggie, tras prepararse a toda prisa, tuvo que aguardar sentada en el jardín, dispuesta para el viaje. Lucy estaba ocupada en la casa, envolviendo algunos regalos comprados en la feria de caridad para los niños de Basset, y cuando se oyó una fuerte llamada en la puerta Maggie se asustó, no fuera Lucy a acompañar a Stephen hasta ella: seguro que era Stephen.

Sin embargo, el visitante salió solo al jardín y se sentó a su lado, en una butaca. No era Stephen.

—Desde este asiento se ven las puntas de los pinos albares, Maggie —se atrevió a decir Philip. Aunque se habían dado la mano en silencio, Maggie lo había mirado con una sonrisa cariñosa, idéntica a la de otros tiempos.

—Sí —contestó Maggie—. Los miro con frecuencia y me gustaría ver otra vez el sol poniente sobre los troncos. Pero sólo he vuelto una vez, camino del cementerio, con mi madre.

—Yo sí he estado allí… Voy por allí con frecuencia —dijo Philip—. Sólo el pasado me anima a vivir.

El recuerdo y la piedad empujaron a Maggie a poner la mano sobre la de Philip. ¡Habían caminado tantas veces de la mano!

—Recuerdo todos los rincones y todo lo que me contaste en cada uno de ellos, bellas historias de las que nunca había oído hablar.

—Querrás ir pronto, ¿verdad, Maggie? —preguntó Philip, sintiéndose tímido y tembloroso—. El molino pronto volverá a ser la casa de tu hermano.

—Sí, pero yo no estaré allí —dijo Maggie—. Esa felicidad sólo la conoceré de oídas. Me voy otra vez. ¿No te lo ha dicho Lucy?

—Entonces, ¿el futuro nunca se unirá con el pasado, Maggie? ¿Ese libro está cerrado?

Los ojos grises que tantas veces se habían alzado hasta ella con suplicante adoración la miraron, con un último rayo de esperanza. Maggie los miró con sus ojos grandes y sinceros.

—Ese libro no se cerrará nunca, Philip —dijo con grave tristeza—. No deseo un futuro que rompa los lazos del pasado. Pero el lazo que me une a mi hermano es uno de los más fuertes. No puedo hacer nada voluntariamente que me separe de él para siempre.

—¿Es ése el único motivo que nos mantendrá separados? —preguntó Philip, con la desesperada determinación de obtener una respuesta definitiva.

—El único —contestó Maggie con tranquila decisión, plenamente convencida. En aquel momento se sentía como si la copa encantada hubiera caído al suelo. Todavía perduraba la reacción de entusiasmo, que le daba un

orgulloso dominio de sí misma, y miraba al futuro con la sensación de que lo escogía con calma.

Durante unos minutos permanecieron con las manos unidas y callados: en Maggie estaban más presentes las primeras escenas de amor y separación que aquel mismo momento, y tenía ante sí a Philip en las Fosas Rojas.

Philip sintió que debería haberse sentido totalmente feliz con aquella respuesta: era tan nítida y transparente como el agua que la marea deja en las rocas. ¿Por qué no era completamente feliz? Sin duda, sólo la omnisciencia que permitiera ver los repliegues más sutiles del corazón podría calmar los celos.

Capítulo XI

En el camino

Maggie llevaba cuatro días en casa de la tía Moss, dando un nuevo brillo al sol de los primeros días de junio a los ojos apagados por las penas de aquella mujer afectuosa y marcando una época para sus primos, grandes y chicos, que aprendían sus palabras y sus gestos de memoria, como si fuera un efímero avatar de la belleza y la sabiduría perfectas.

En ese tranquilo momento de la vida de una granja antes de que llegue la hora de ordeñar a las vacas por la tarde, Maggie se encontraba con su tía y varios primos dando de comer a las gallinas. Los grandes edificios que rodeaban la hondonada del patio eran tan lúgubres y tan ruinosos como siempre, pero sobre la vieja tapia del jardín, los descuidados rosales empezaban a agitar su carga veraniega, y la madera gris y los viejos ladrillos de la casa, en el piso superior, tenían un aspecto antiguo y aletargado bajo la luz de la tarde que tan bien sentaba a aquella hora de inactividad. Maggie, con la capota sobre el brazo, sonreía a un grupo de suaves pollitos.

—¡Santo cielo! —exclamó su tía—. ¿Quién es ese caballero que entra por la puerta de la verja?

Era un jinete montado en un gran caballo castaño con el cuello y los costados ennegrecidos por el galope. Maggie sintió un latido en la cabeza y el corazón, tan horrible como la resurrección de un temible enemigo que había fingido estar muerto.

—¿Quién es, Maggie? —preguntó la señora Moss, advirtiendo en el rostro de ésta que lo conocía.

—Es el señor Guest —contestó Maggie con voz débil—. Es el… es un caballero muy amigo de mi prima.

Stephen estaba ya cerca de ellas, había saltado del caballo y saludaba con el sombrero mientras avanzaba.

—Sujeta el caballo, Willy —ordenó la señora Moss al muchacho de doce años.

—No, gracias —dijo Stephen, tirando de la cabeza inquieta del caballo- Debo marcharme de inmediato. Tengo que darle un recado, señorita Tulliver; se trata de un asunto personal. ¿Puedo tomarme la libertad de rogarle que camine un poco conmigo?

Tenía la expresión entre cansada e irritada propia de un hombre al que alguna inquietud o molestia ha hecho inútiles la comida y la cama. Hablaba de modo brusco, como si el recado fuera demasiado urgente para molestarse por lo que pudiera pensar la señora Moss de aquella visita y su petición. La buena señora Moss, bastante nerviosa por encontrarse en presencia de aquel caballero aparentemente tan altanero, se preguntaba en su interior si haría bien o mal al invitarlo de nuevo a dejar el caballo y entrar en la casa cuando Maggie, consciente de lo violento de la situación e incapaz de decir nada, se puso la capota y empezó a caminar hacia la puerta de la verja.

Stephen también dio media vuelta y caminó a su lado, llevando el caballo de las riendas.

No pronunciaron ni una palabra hasta que se encontraron en el camino y recorrieron cuatro o cinco yardas. Entonces Maggie, que no había dejado de mirar al frente, dio media vuelta para retroceder.

—No necesito ir más lejos —dijo con arrogante resentimiento—. No sé si a usted le parecerá una conducta caballerosa y delicada colocarme en tal posición que me he visto obligada a venir con usted, o si, por el contrario, querrá seguir insultándome, forzándome así a hablar con usted.

—Es evidente que le ha disgustado que viniera —dijo Stephen con amargura—. Es evidente que no le importa lo que pueda sufrir un hombre, lo único que le preocupa es su dignidad femenina.

Maggie se sobresaltó ligeramente, como si hubiera sufrido una levísima descarga eléctrica.

—Como si no bastara con la confusión en que vivo, con estar locamente enamorado de usted, con tener que resistir la pasión más poderosa que puede sentir un hombre porque intento ser fiel a otras exigencias: además, usted me trata como si fuera un bruto tosco que desea ofenderla. Cuando, si de mí dependiera, le pediría que aceptara mi mano, mi fortuna y mi vida entera e hiciera lo que quisiera con ello. Sé que perdí el control y me tomé una libertad injustificable. Me odio por haberlo hecho. Pero me arrepentí de inmediato, no he dejado de arrepentirme desde entonces. No debería usted pensar que fue un gesto imperdonable: cuando un hombre ama con toda su alma, como yo la amo, puede verse dominado por sus sentimientos durante unos momentos; pero usted sabe, debe creerme, que el mayor dolor que yo podría sufrir es el de haberla ofendido, que haría lo que fuera para borrar ese error.

Maggie no se atrevía a hablar, no se atrevía a mover la cabeza. La fuerza procedente del resentimiento había desaparecido y los labios le temblaban visiblemente. No se veía capaz de pronunciar el total perdón que sentía como respuesta a aquella confesión.

Habían llegado otra vez ante la puerta de la verja y Maggie se detuvo, temblorosa.

—No debe decir usted estas cosas, no debo oírlas —dijo, bajando los ojos con desdicha cuando Stephen se puso ante ella para impedirle avanzar hacia la puerta—. Siento mucho sus sufrimientos, pero no sirve de nada hablar de ellos.

—Sí, sí sirve —dijo Stephen impetuosamente—. Serviría si usted me tratara con cierta piedad y consideración en lugar de tratarme injustamente. Lo soportaría todo más tranquilamente si supiera que no me odia porque me considera un petimetre insolente. Míreme, soy un individuo atormentado: día tras día, he cabalgado treinta millas para dejar de pensar en usted.

Maggie no miró, no se atrevió a hacerlo. Ya había visto aquel rostro acosado.

—No lo tengo a usted en mal concepto —dijo amablemente.

—Entonces, vida mía, mírame —suplicó Stephen con un tono profundo y tierno—. No te alejes de mí todavía. Dame un momento de felicidad, que sienta que me has perdonado.

—Sí, de verdad lo he perdonado —dijo Maggie, conmovida por aquel tono y asustada de sí misma—. Pero le ruego que me deje pasar. Le ruego que se vaya.

Una gruesa lágrima cayó desde debajo de sus párpados cerrados.

—No puedo marcharme, no puedo dejarte —dijo Stephen con un ruego todavía más apasionado—. Volveré otra vez si me despides con tanta frialdad. No respondo de mí mismo. Pero si caminas conmigo sólo un poco más, será suficiente para mí. Verás que tu enfado sólo ha conseguido que me muestre diez veces más irracional.

Maggie dio media vuelta, pero Tancred el caballo castaño, empezó a protestar tan enérgicamente contra aquellos frecuentes cambios de dirección que Stephen llamó a Willy Moss, al que había visto espiando a través de la verja.

—¡Muchacho! Ven y sujétame el caballo durante cinco minutos.

—¡Oh, no! —se apresuró a decir Maggie—. Mi tía lo encontrará muy extraño.

—Da lo mismo —contestó Stephen con impaciencia—. No conocen a la gente de Saint Ogg's. Paséalo por aquí durante cinco minutos —añadió mirando a Willy, que ahora estaba cerca de ellos. Regresó junto a Maggie y caminaron. Estaba claro que Maggie debía marcharse.

—Tómame del brazo —le rogó Stephen. Y Maggie lo cogió con la sensación de que se deslizaba por una pesadilla.

—Este sufrimiento no va a tener fin —empezó a decir, esforzándose por rechazar aquella influencia mediante la palabra—. Esto es malo… bajo… permitir una palabra o una mirada que Lucy… que los demás no deban ver. Piense en Lucy.

—Claro que pienso en ella… bendita muchacha… Si no lo hiciera… —Stephen había colocado una mano sobre la que Maggie apoyaba en su brazo y a ambos les costaba hablar.

—Y, aunque Lucy no existiera, yo tengo otros compromisos —prosiguió Maggie, finalmente, con un esfuerzo desesperado.

—¿Estás comprometida con Philip Wakem? ¿Es eso? —preguntó Stephen rápidamente.

—Me considero comprometida con él. No tengo intención de casarme con ningún otro.

Stephen permaneció en silencio hasta que salieron de la zona soleada y entraron en un camino lateral, herboso y cubierto de vegetación. Entonces estalló.

—Es antinatural, es horrible. Maggie, si me quisieras como yo te quiero, nos olvidaríamos de todo por nuestro amor. Romperíamos estos lazos equivocados que se hicieron en un momento de ceguera y nos casaríamos.

—Preferiría morir a caer en esa tentación —contestó Maggie con voz clara, lenta y profunda. La fuerza espiritual conseguida durante años de dolor la ayudó aquella difícil situación. Maggie retiró el brazo.

—Entonces, dime que no me quieres —dijo Stephen casi con violencia —. Dime que quieres más a otro.

A Maggie le pasó por la cabeza que había una manera de librarse de aquella lucha: decirle a Stephen que su corazón pertenecía a Philip. Pero sus labios no quisieron decirlo y guardó silencio.

—Si de verdad me quieres, mi vida —dijo Stephen cariñosamente, tomándole de nuevo la mano y colocándosela sobre el brazo—, es mejor, es justo que nos casemos. No podemos evitar el daño que eso cause. Es algo que ha sucedido sin que lo buscáramos. Es natural, se ha apoderado de mí a pesar de todos los esfuerzos que he hecho para resistirme. Dios sabe que he intentado ser fiel a un compromiso tácito y no he hecho más que empeorar las cosas. Habría sido mejor ceder de entrada.

Maggie seguía callada. ¡Ojalá aquello no estuviera mal, ojalá pudiera convencerse y no tener que seguir luchando contra esa corriente, tan suave y poderosa como un río en verano!

—Di que sí, vida mía —rogó Stephen, inclinándose para mirarla a la cara con aire suplicante—. ¿Qué puede importarnos en este mundo si nos pertenecemos?

Percibía en la cara el aliento de Stephen, los labios muy cerca de los suyos, pero el amor que sentía por ella le inspiraba temor.

Los labios y los párpados de Maggie temblaron. Abrió mucho los ojos para mirarlo un instante, como un precioso animal salvaje que se mostrara tímido y rechazara las caricias, para luego dar media vuelta y huir a su refugio.

Al fin y al cabo —prosiguió Stephen con tono impaciente, intentando vencer sus escrúpulos al mismo tiempo que los de ella—, no rompo ningún compromiso formal: si Lucy diera su afecto a otro, yo no tendría ningún derecho a reclamar nada. Si tú no estás formalmente prometida a Philip, ninguno de los dos está comprometido.

—No cree usted en lo que dice, no es eso lo que siente —dijo Maggie, muy seria—. Piensa, igual que yo, que los verdaderos lazos residen en los sentimientos y esperanzas que hemos hecho nacer en los demás. Si no fuera así, cualquier vínculo podría romperse cuando no hubiera castigo. No existiría la fidelidad.

Stephen se calló: no podía continuar aquella discusión; durante los primeros tiempos de dudas había defendido la convicción opuesta, pero no había tardado en verlo de otro modo.

—No se puede cumplir esa promesa —insistió Stephen con energía—. Es antinatural: si nos entregáramos a otra persona, sería una farsa. Eso también estaría mal, y supondría la desgracia de ellos y no sólo la nuestra. Maggie, tienes que verlo, seguro que te das cuenta.

La miró ansiosamente en busca del menor signo de conformidad; le sujetaba la mano con un gesto amplio, firme y tierno. Maggie siguió callada durante unos instantes, con los ojos clavados en el suelo; después respiró hondo y dijo, levantando los ojos hacia él, con una tristeza solemne.

—Es difícil. La vida es muy difícil. Algunas veces me parece que deberíamos seguir nuestros sentimientos; pero estos sentimientos chocan continuamente con los lazos que la vida anterior ha anudado en torno a nosotros, los lazos que han hecho que otros dependan de nosotros, y los destrozarían. Si la vida fuera tan fácil y sencilla como debió de ser en el paraíso y pudiéramos ver siempre… Quiero decir que si la vida no nos cargara con deberes antes de que llegara el amor, entonces el amor sería la señal de que dos seres deben pertenecerse el uno al otro. Pero veo… siento que ahora las cosas no son así: debemos renunciar a algunas cosas en la

vida, algunos debemos renunciar al amor. Hay muchas cosas que no entiendo y me resultan oscuras… Pero hay una que veo con claridad: no debo, no puedo buscar mi felicidad a costa de la de los demás. El amor es algo natural, pero también lo son la piedad, la fidelidad y la memoria. Y estos sentimientos me castigarían si no los obedeciera. Me acosaría el sufrimiento causado. Nuestro amor estaría envenenado. No me presiones: ayúdame, ayúdame… precisamente porque te quiero.

A medida que hablaba, las palabras de Maggie iban haciéndose más apasionadas; tenía el rostro sonrojado y los ojos llenos de un amor suplicante. La nobleza de Stephen vibró ante aquella súplica; sin embargo, al mismo tiempo —¿cómo iba a ser de otro modo?— aquella belleza implorante le resultaba más difícil de resistir.

—Vida mía —dijo en apenas un susurro mientras la rodeaba con el brazo—. Lo haré. Soportaré todo lo que tú desees. Pero dame un beso…, uno solo… el último… antes de que nos separemos.

Un beso y una larga mirada, hasta que Maggie dijo:

—Deja que me vaya. Démonos prisa.

Maggie salió corriendo y no dijeron ni una palabra más. Cuando llegaron a ver a Willy y al caballo, Stephen se detuvo e hizo un gesto, y Maggie cruzó sola la verja. La señora Moss aguardaba sola en la puerta del viejo porche: había hecho entrar a todos los primos en una muestra de consideración; podía ser motivo de alegría que Maggie tuviera un novio rico y guapo, pero seguramente se sentiría violenta al regresar y eso no sería motivo de alegría alguna. En cualquier caso, la señora Moss esperaba inquieta para recibir a Maggie sola. El rostro de la pequeña decía con toda claridad que si aquello era alegría, era de una clase muy agitada y dudosa.

—Oh, tía Gritty. Estoy destrozada. Ojalá me hubiera muerto a los quince años. Entonces parecía tan fácil dejarlo todo. Ahora es tan duro…

La pobre muchacha echó los brazos al cuello de su tía y se echó a llorar con largos y profundos sollozos.

Capítulo XII

Una reunión familiar

Al final de la semana, Maggie dejó a la buena tía Gritty y se dirigió a Garum Firs para visitar a la tía Pullet, según lo acordado. Entre tanto, se habían producido algunos acontecimientos totalmente inesperados e iba a tener lugar una fiesta familiar en Garum para analizar y celebrar el cambio de fortuna de los Tulliver que, probablemente, borraría la sombra de sus faltas, de la misma manera que desaparece el limbo de un eclipse, y haría que a partir de aquel momento sus virtudes oscurecidas volvieran a brillar con pleno esplendor. Reconforta saber que no sólo los ministros recién llegados disfrutan de un período de gracia, caracterizado por la apreciación y el elogio: en muchas familias respetables a lo ancho y largo de este reino, los parientes que se han hecho dignos de reconocimiento se encuentran con una cordialidad similar que, liberada de la coerción de cualquier antecedente, sugiere la esperanzadora posibilidad de que algún día nos encontremos, sin advertirlo siquiera, en plena edad de oro, en la que los basiliscos ya no ataquen y los lobos sólo muestren los dientes con las más amables intenciones.

Lucy llegó temprano para adelantarse a la tía Glegg, ya que deseaba mantener una conversación tranquila con Maggie sobre aquellas noticias maravillosas. Parecía, ¿a que sí?, dijo Lucy con lindo aire entendido, como si todo, incluso las desgracias de los demás (¡pobrecillos!), conspiraran para conseguir que la pobre y querida tía Tulliver, el primo Tom y la arrogante Maggie, si no se obstinaba en lo contrario, fueran tan felices como merecían

tras tantas penas. ¡Y pensar que el mismo día en que Tom regresó de Newcastle —el mismísimo día—, el desgraciado de Jetsome, que el señor Wakem había colocado en el molino, montó borracho a caballo y éste lo tiró, y se encontraba ahora en Saint Ogg's gravemente herido, de manera que Wakem había insistido en que los compradores se hicieran cargo de inmediato del molino! Era terrible para aquel desgraciado joven, pero parecía como si aquel accidente hubiera tenido lugar entonces y no en otro momento para que el primo Tom tuviera cuanto antes la justa recompensa a su conducta ejemplar: papá tenía de él una opinión excelente. Sin duda, la tía Tulliver debía ir al molino y cuidar la casa para Tom: para Lucy aquello suponía una incomodidad doméstica, pero la idea de que la pobre tiíta estuviera de nuevo en su casa y fuera recuperando poco a poco las comodidades…

En relación con este último punto, Lucy tenía unos astutos proyectos, y después de que ella y Maggie recorrieran la brillante y peligrosa escalera para pasar al bello salón, donde los mismos rayos de sol parecían más limpios que en cualquier otro lugar, atacó el punto débil del enemigo, como habría hecho cualquier otro gran estratega.

—Tía Pullet —dijo, sentándose en el sofá y arreglando con mimo la cinta de la cofia de la dama—. Quisiera que pensara en la ropa y en los objetos de casa que va a dar a Tom para que se instale; como es usted siempre tan generosa, regala siempre objetos muy bonitos; y si da ejemplo, la tía Glegg lo seguirá.

—Si no puede, querida —declaró la señora Pullet con inusual energía —, porque su ropa no se parece ni de lejos a la mía, eso te lo puedo asegurar. Nunca tendría mi buen gusto, ni que se gastara tanto como yo. Cuadros grandes y animales, como ciervos y zorros, así son todos sus manteles. Ni rombos ni lunares. Pero es una pena que una divida la ropa antes de morir. No pensaba hacerlo, Bessy —prosiguió la señora Pullet, moviendo la cabeza y mirando a su hermana Tulliver—, cuando tú y yo escogimos el doble rombo, el primer lino que hilamos, y el Señor sabrá adónde ha ido a parar tu ropa.

—No pude evitarlo, hermana —dijo la pobre señora Tulliver, acostumbrada a sentirse acusada—. Yo no quería, y me pasé noches enteras

pensando en que mi mejor ropa blanca se perdería por todo el país.

—Tome usted un caramelito de menta, señora Tulliver —dijo el tío Pullet con la sensación de ofrecer un consuelo barato y saludable, que él mismo recomendaba con el ejemplo.

—Pero, tía Pullet —dijo Lucy—, si tiene usted muchísima ropa preciosa. ¿Y si hubiera tenido hijas? También la habría dividido cuando se hubieran casado.

—Bueno, no digo que no quiera hacerlo —dijo la señora Pullet—, porque ahora que Tom ha tenido tanta suerte, es justo que sus familiares lo ayudemos. Tengo las mantelerías que compré cuando se subastaron tus cosas, Bessy. Las compré por pura bondad, porque han estado desde entonces en el arcón. Pero no pienso dar más muselina india a Maggie ni cosas d *d'*esas si se *l'*ocurre ponerse a servir otra vez, cuando bien podría quedarse conmigo, hacerme compañía y coser para mí, si es que no hace falta en casa de su hermano.

Para la mentalidad de los Dodson, trabajar como profesora o institutriz equivalía a «ponerse a servi», y que Maggie regresara a esa ínfima situación, ahora que las circunstancias le ofrecían otras posibilidades, probablemente sería un punto de conflicto con todos sus familiares, no sólo con Lucy. La antigua Maggie, en estado puro, con el cabello suelto y todavía en fase de promesa incierta, resultaba una sobrina muy poco deseable; pero la Maggie de ahora era capaz de ser al mismo tiempo ornamental y útil. El tema salió de nuevo en presencia del tío y la tía Glegg, mientras tomaban el té y unos bollos.

—¡Eh, eh! —exclamó el señor Glegg, dando unas afables palmaditas en la espalda de Maggie—. ¡Tonterías, tonterías! No nos digas que piensas volver a trabajar, Maggie. Caramba, seguro que pescaste media docena de enamorados en la venta benéfica, ¿no sirve ninguno? ¡Vamos!

—Glegg —dijo su esposa con la severa cortesía que hacía juego con su flequillo postizo más rizado—, te ruego que me perdones, pero me parece que no te comportas con la seriedad adecuada en un hombre de tu edad. El respeto y los deberes hacia sus tías y el resto de su familia, que tan bien se portan con ella, deberían haber impedido que se marchara de nuevo sin

consultarnos. Y no los enamorados, si es que debo emplear esa palabra, que jamás se ha oído en mi familia.

—¡Anda! ¿Y cómo nos llamaban cuando íbamos a verlas, vecino Pullet? Entonces sí que hablaban de amores —dijo el señor Glegg con un guiño alegre mientras el señor Pullet, ante una conversación tan dulce, se servía otro terrón.

—Glegg —insistió la señora Glegg—, si piensas seguir comportándote con esa falta de delicadeza, házmelo saber.

—Ca, Jane, si tu marido sólo está de broma —dijo la señora Pullet—. Que bromee mientras tiene fuerza y salud. Mira al pobre señor Tilt, que se le torció la boca y no podía reír aunque quisiera.

—Entonces, Glegg, si me puedo permitir interrumpir tus bromas, hazme el favor de pasarme los bollos —dijo su esposa—. Aunque no se quién puede encontrar gracioso que una sobrina desprecie a *l'*hermana mayor de su madre, cabeza de la familia; que se limite a ir y venir con cortas visitas cuando está en la ciudad y después decida marcharse sin que yo lo sepa, mientras yo *l'*estaba preparando unas cofias para que me las cosiera. Y hacerme eso a mí, que he dividido mi dinero en partes iguales…

—Hermana —interrumpió la señora Tulliver muy inquieta—. *T'*aseguro que Maggie nunca pensó en marcharse sin pasar unos días en tu casa, igual que en la de los demás. No deseo yo que se marche, todo lo contrario. *T'*aseguro que no tengo yo la culpa, yo venga y venga a decírselo: «Niña, no tienes por qué marchart». Pero todavía le quedan diez o quince días antes de irse: puede pasarlos en tu casa y Lucy y yo ya vendremos a verla.

—Bessy —dijo la señora Glegg—, si *t* 'ocuparas de pensar un poco, te darías cuenta de que no me vale la pena preparar una cama ni tomarme tantas molestias, justo al final de la temporada, cuando nuestra casa no está a más de un cuarto de hora andando de la del señor Deane. Puede venir a primera hora de la mañana y marcharse por la noche, y dar las gracias de tener una buena tía tan cerca para ir a verla. Sé que, a su edad, yo lo habría hecho.

—Vamos, Jane —dijo la señora Pullet—. No les vendría mal a tus camas que alguien durmiera en ellas. *L'*habitación de rayas huele mucho a

humedad, y el espejo tiene moho. Una vez que me llevaste allí pensé que me moría de un ataque.

—¡Oh, aquí está Tom! —exclamó Lucy, palmoteando—. Ha venido montado en *Simbad*, como yo le dije. Temía que no cumpliera su promesa.

En cuanto Tom entró, Maggie se levantó de un salto para darle un beso, emocionada. Era la primera vez que se veían desde que a Tom se le había ofrecido la posibilidad de recuperar el molino; retuvo su mano y lo llevó hasta la butaca situada a su lado. Para Maggie seguía siendo una preocupación perpetua, firmemente arraigada a pesar de todos los cambios, que ninguna nube se interpusiera entre ambos.

—Hola, Maggie —dijo Tom dedicándole una cariñosa sonrisa—. ¿Cómo está la tía Moss?

—Pasa, pasa, caballero —dijo el señor Glegg tendiéndole la mano—. Caramba, eres tan importante que, al parecer te lo llevas todo por delante. Te ha llegado el golpe de suerte mucho antes de lo que nos llego a nosotros, los viejos, pero te deseo todo tipo de venturas. Seguro que algún día el molino será totalmente tuyo. Seguro que no te quedarás a medio camino.

—Aunque espero que no olvide que se lo debe a la familia de su madre —señaló la señora Glegg—. Si no nos hubiéramos ocupado de él, se habría quedado pobre. En nuestra familia no hubo ninguna quiebra, ningún pleito, ningún derroche, ni nadie murió nunca sin *testamiento*…

—No, no ha habido muertes repentinas —intervino la tía Pullet—. Siempre *s'*ha llamado al médico. Pero Tom tenía la piel de los Dodson, ya lo dije desde el primer día. Y no sé qué es lo que tú piensas hacer, hermana Glegg, pero yo tengo intención de darle una mantelería de las más grandes que tengo, además de algún juego de cama. No sé qué más haré, pero eso *t'*aseguro que sí, y si me muero mañana, señor Pullet, *has* el favor de recordarlo, aunque te harás un lío con las llaves y no recordarás que en el armario de la izquierda, en el tercer estante, bajo las cofias de dormir con cintas anchas, no las estrechas y rizadas, está la llave del cajón de la habitación azul, donde está la llave del gabinete azul. Seguro que *t'*equivocas y yo nunca lo sabré. Tienes una memoria espléndida para mis pastillas y mis jarabes, siempre lo digo, pero te haces un lío con las llaves.

—La triste perspectiva de la confusión que se produciría tras su muerte conmovió mucho a la señora Pullet.

—Exageras, Sophy, con tanto cerrar bajo llave —dijo la señora Glegg en un tono de cierto disgusto ante tanta tontería—. Vas más lejos que tu familia. Nadie dirá que no cierro las cosas con llave; pero hago lo razonable y nada más. Y, en cuanto a la ropa, ya miraré lo que puede ser útil para hacer un regalo a mi sobrino. Tengo ropa que nunca *s'*ha blanqueado, mejor que la fina holanda de otros; y espero que se acueste en ella y piense en su tía.

Tom dio las gracias a la señora Glegg, pero rehuyó la promesa de meditar por las noches en las virtudes de ésta; y la señora Glegg cambió de tema al preguntar sobre las intenciones del señor Deane en relación con el vapor.

Lucy había rogado a Tom que acudiera con *Simbad*porque tenía sus planes. Cuando llego el momento de regresar a casa, lo más adecuado pareció ser que un criado condujera el caballo y el primo Tom llevara a su casa a su madre y a Lucy.

—Siéntese sola, tiíta —dijo la astuta damita—, porque tengo que sentarme junto a Tom; tengo muchas cosas que contarle.

Empujada por la cariñosa inquietud que le inspiraba Maggie, Lucy no quería retrasar más el momento de tener una conversación sobre ella con Tom, el cual, según creía, ante la alegría de poder satisfacer sus deseos sobre el molino, se mostraría maleable y flexible. Su propio carácter no le daba ninguna pista sobre el de Tom y se sintió tan desconcertada como triste al advertir el desagradable cambio de actitud cuando le contó la historia del modo en que Philip había influido en su padre. Lucy había pensado que esa revelación sería un gran golpe táctico que haría que Tom aceptara a Philip de inmediato y, además, le demostraría que el señor Wakem estaba dispuesto a recibir a Maggie con todos los honores que merecía una nuera. Así pues, no faltaría nada para que el querido Tom, que siempre lucía una agradable sonrisa cuando miraba a su prima Lucy, cambiara por completo de opinión, dijera lo contrario de lo que decía antes y declarara que, por su parte, estaba encantado de que las viejas disputas se

saldaran y que Maggie y Philip se comprometieran rápidamente: en opinión de Lucy, nada podía ser más fácil.

Sin embargo, para las mentes fuertemente marcadas por las cualidades positivas y negativas que son origen de la severidad —fuerza de voluntad, rectitud de propósitos consciente, estrechez de miras e intelecto, gran capacidad de dominarse a sí mismo y tendencia a controlar a los demás—, los prejuicios son el alimento natural de unas tendencias que no pueden sostenerse con ese conocimiento complejo, fragmentado y generador de dudas que llamamos «verda». Venga de donde venga el prejuicio: por herencia, arrastrado por el aire, como rumor a través de la vista, lo cierto es que estos caracteres tenderán a acogerlo: podrán afirmarlo con valor y contundencia, utilizarlo para llenar la ausencia de ideas propias, imponérselo a los demás con la autoridad de un derecho consciente: es al mismo tiempo un cetro y un bastón. Cualquier prejuicio que satisfaga estos fines resulta obvio. El recto Tom era de esta clase de personas: las críticas que hacía en su interior a los errores de su padre no le impedían adoptar sus prejuicios; un prejuicio contra un hombre de vida y principios laxos, en el que convergían todos los sentimientos de decepción de su orgullo personal y familiar. Otros sentimientos contribuían también a generar la amarga repugnancia que Tom sentía hacia Philip y hacia la unión de éste con Maggie; y, a pesar del ascendiente de Lucy sobre su terco primo, no consiguió más que una negativa tajante a aprobar semejante matrimonio: Naturalmente, Maggie podía hacer lo que quisiera, puesto que había declarado su decisión de ser independiente. En cuanto a él, sería fiel al recuerdo de su padre y no tendría jamás relación alguna con los Wakem.

Así pues, con su entusiasta mediación, Lucy no consiguió más que convencer a Tom de que la perversa determinación de Maggie de volver a trabajar iba a metamorfosearse, tal como sucedía con sus decisiones, en algo igualmente perverso pero totalmente distinto: contraer matrimonio con Philip Wakem.

Capítulo XIII

Arrastrados por la marea

Antes de que transcurriera una semana, Maggie se encontraba de nuevo en Saint Ogg's y, exteriormente, parecía como si nada hubiera cambiado desde el principio de su estancia. Le resultaba fácil llenar las mañanas lejos de Lucy, ya que debía… cumplir con las visitas prometidas a la tía Glegg, y era natural que dedicara a su madre más tiempo durante las últimas semanas, especialmente cuando había que pensar en los preparativos para llevar la casa de Tom. Sin embargo, Lucy no admitía que ningún pretexto la mantuviera alejada durante las tardes: debía siempre llegar de casa de la tía Glegg antes de la comida. «Si no, ¿cuándo te veo?», decía Lucy con un mohín lloroso que resultaba irresistible. Y, de modo inexplicable, Stephen Guest había tomado por costumbre comer en casa del señor Deane con la mayor frecuencia posible en lugar de evitarlo, como sucedía antes. Al principio, empezaba el día con la decisión de no comer allí y no ir siquiera por la tarde hasta que Maggie se hubiera marchado. Incluso había planeado iniciar un viaje aprovechando el agradable tiempo de junio: los dolores de cabeza que había estado alegando como motivo para su apatía y su silencio eran excusa suficiente. Pero el viaje no tuvo lugar y a la cuarta mañana ya no tomó ninguna decisión sobre la tarde: sólo las esperaba como últimas oportunidades de estar con Maggie, en las que podría robar otro roce, otra mirada. ¿Por qué no? No tenían nada que esconder: sabían —se habían confesado su amor y habían renunciado el uno al otro— que iban a separarse. El honor y la conciencia iban a alejarlos. Maggie, con aquel

ruego desde lo más profundo de su alma, así lo había decidido; con todo, bien podrían mirarse largamente por última vez a ambos lados del abismo antes de alejarse para no volver a verse hasta que aquella extraña luz se hubiera apagado para siempre de sus ojos.

Entre tanto, en contraste con sus habituales arranques de animación y entusiasmo, Maggie se desenvolvía con tal lentitud y torpor que Lucy habría tenido que buscar otra causa para semejante cambio si no hubiera estado convencida de que la situación en que Maggie se encontraba, entre Philip y su hermano, y la perspectiva de aquel tedioso destierro que se había impuesto bastaban para explicar cierta depresión. Sin embargo, bajo aquel aturdimiento tenía lugar una batalla entre emociones de una ferocidad tal que Maggie, en toda una vida de lucha, jamás había conocido ni presagiado: tenía la sensación de que el peor rasgo de su carácter había vivido agazapado hasta aquel instante y se había despertado repentinamente, armado hasta los dientes, con un poder espantoso y abrumador. En algunos momentos, un egoísmo cruel parecía apoderarse de ella. ¿Por qué no iba a tener que sufrir Lucy? ¿Y por qué no Philip? Ella había tenido que sufrir durante muchos años de su vida, ¿y quién había renunciado a algo por ella? Y cuando algo similar a aquella plenitud de la existencia —amor, riqueza, comodidades, refinamientos—, todo aquello que ansiaba su naturaleza, se encontraba al alcance de la mano, ¿por qué iba ella a renunciar para que se lo quedara otra, otra que tal vez lo necesitaba menos? Pero en mitad de este nuevo tumulto apasionado se hacían oír las viejas voces cada vez con mayor intensidad hasta que, de vez en cuando, parecían aplastar el conflicto. ¿Acaso esta existencia que le tentaba era la vida plena que había soñado? ¿Dónde quedaban entonces los recuerdos de su lucha anterior, toda la piedad por el dolor ajeno que había alimentado durante años de afectos y privaciones? ¿Dónde quedaba el presentimiento divino de que le aguardaba algo más elevado que el mero placer personal y que daba a su vida un carácter sagrado? De la misma manera que no podría gustarle caminar lastimándose los pies, tampoco debía aspirar a una vida iniciada hiriendo la fe y la comprensión, que eran las principales virtudes de su alma. Y, además, si el dolor le resultaba tan difícil de soportar, ¿no sucedía lo mismo a los demás? ¡Oh, Dios mío, que no cause dolor a los otros y dame fuerzas

para soportar el que me corresponda! ¿Cómo era posible que se viera sumida en una lucha como aquélla, contra una tentación de la que creía sentirse tan a salvo como de cualquier crimen deliberado? ¿Cuándo había tenido lugar aquel primer y odioso momento en el que había sido consciente de un sentimiento que se estrellaba contra su verdad, su afecto y gratitud, y cómo era posible que no hubiera hecho nada para sacudírselo con horror, como si hubiera sido algo detestable? Y, sin embargo, puesto que aquella influencia extraña, dulce, dominante, no la conquistaba, no podía conquistarla, y puesto que quedaría reducida a los limites de su sufrimiento personal… coincidía con Stephen en la idea de que todavía podían arrebatar instantes de muda confesión antes de que llegara el momento de la separación. ¿Pues no sufría él también? Lo percibía a diario, lo veía en la enfermiza expresión de hastío que adoptaba cuando se mostraba indiferente a todo, excepto a la posibilidad de verla. ¿Cómo podía negarse a responder a aquella mirada implorante que la seguía, como un quedo murmullo de amor y dolor? Cada vez la rechazaba con menor intensidad hasta que, al final, en algunas ocasiones, las tardes llegaban a estar hechas de miradas: pensaban en ellas hasta que se producían y después no podían pensar en otra cosa. Stephen parecía también más interesado en cantar: era una manera de hablar a Maggie; quizá no advertía con claridad que lo empujaba a ello el deseo secreto, totalmente contrario a sus decisiones conscientes, de aumentar la influencia que tenía sobre ella. Lector, si prestas atención a tus propias palabras, verás que en ocasiones parecen dictadas por los propósitos menos conscientes y comprenderás así la contradicción de Stephen.

Philip Wakem era un visitante menos asiduo, pero aparecía algunas tardes y así resultó que se encontraba allí un día, al atardecer, mientras estaban sentados en el césped.

—Ahora que la serie de visitas a la tía Glegg se ha terminado —dijo Lucy—, me parece que podríamos salir en bote cada día hasta que Maggie se marche. No ha podido hacerlo debido a esas latosas visitas y es lo que más le gusta, ¿verdad, Maggie?

—Supongo que le gusta más que cualquier otro medio de transporte —aclaró Philip dirigiendo una sonrisa a Maggie, que estaba apoltronada en

una tumbona de jardín—; si tanto le gustara, vendería el alma al barquero fantasma que ronda por el Floss para que la llevara en bote para siempre.

—¿Le gustaría ser su barquero? —preguntó Lucy—. Si quisiera, podría venir con nosotros y tomar un remo. Si el Floss fuera un lago tranquilo en lugar de un río, no necesitaríamos a ningún caballero, porque Maggie sabe remar muy bien. Pero lo cierto es que nos vemos obligadas a solicitar la ayuda de caballeros y escuderos, que no parecen ofrecerse con gran presteza.

Lanzó, en broma, una mirada de reproche a Stephen, el cual paseaba de un lado a otro, canturreando en un falsete pianísimo:

La sed que surge del alma exige un sorbo divino.

Stephen no pareció oírla y se mantuvo distante: sucedía con frecuencia durante las últimas visitas de Philip.

—No parece usted inclinado a ir en bote —dijo Lucy cuando Stephen se acercó a sentarse a su lado en el banco—. ¿No le apetece remar?

—Oh, no me gusta ir con muchas personas en un bote —dijo, casi irritado—. Iré cuando esté usted sola.

Lucy se ruborizó, temerosa de que Philip se molestara: Stephen no acostumbraba a hablar así, pero era evidente que últimamente no se encontraba bien. Philip también se sonrojó, pero no tanto debido a que se sintiera ofendido como a la vaga sospecha de que el mal humor de Stephen tenía algo que ver con Maggie, la cual, mientras él hablaba, se había levantado y había caminado hacia el seto de laureles para contemplar la luz del crepúsculo sobre el río.

—Puesto que la señorita Deane no sabía que al invitarme excluía a otros, renuncio al instante —dijo Philip.

—No, de verdad, no lo haga —dijo Lucy dolida—. Deseo especialmente que venga usted mañana. A las diez y media la marea será la adecuada y hará un tiempo delicioso para remar durante un par de horas hasta Luckreth y regresar caminando antes de que haga demasiado calor. ¿Y cómo puede parecerle que cuatro personas en un bote son demasiadas? —añadió, mirando a Stephen.

—No tengo nada en contra de las personas, sino contra el número —dijo Stephen, algo avergonzado ahora de su grosería—. En caso de ser cuatro, sin duda el cuarto serías tú, Phil. Pero no dividamos el placer de escoltar a las damas y hagámoslo alternativamente. Yo me ocuparé al día siguiente.

Este incidente tuvo por efecto que, de nuevo, Philip prestara atención a Stephen y Maggie; pero cuando volvieron a entrar en la casa, alguien propuso dedicar un rato a la música y, puesto que la señora Tulliver y el señor Deane estaban ocupados jugando al *cribbage*, Maggie se sentó algo alejada, cerca de la mesa donde estaban los libros y las labores; no obstante, no hizo más que abstraerse escuchando la música. En aquel momento, Stephen insistió en que Philip y Lucy cantaran un dúo: no era la primera vez, pero aquella tarde Philip creía advertir cierta doble intención en cada palabra y en cada mirada de Stephen, y lo contempló atentamente, irritado consigo mismo por sus recelos. ¿Acaso Maggie no había negado prácticamente que hubiera motivo alguno de duda, en lo que a ella respectaba? Y Maggie era la verdad personificada; cuando hablaron juntos en el jardín por última vez, era imposible dudar de sus palabras y de su mirada. Quizá Stephen estuviera fascinado por ella (¿había algo más natural?), y, en ese caso, Philip se sentía hasta cierto punto innoble por entrometerse en lo que debía de ser el doloroso secreto de su amigo. Sin embargo, siguió observando. Stephen, alejándose del piano, caminó lentamente hacia la mesa junto a la cual estaba sentada Maggie y hojeó los periódicos, aparentemente para matar el tiempo. Después, con un periódico bajo el brazo y pasándose la mano por el cabello, se sentó dando la espalda al piano, como si se hubiera sentido atraído por alguna noticia local del *Laceham Courier*. En realidad, estaba mirando a Maggie, que no había advertido su aproximación. Cuando Philip estaba presente, Maggie se sentía más fuerte, de la misma manera que no nos cuesta contener las palabras cuando sentimos que nos encontramos en un lugar sagrado. Pero al poco rato oyó que Stephen, con un suavísimo susurro de dolorosa súplica, le decía «mi vid», como un paciente que pidiera algo que se le debería haber dado sin necesidad de reclamarlo. No oía esas palabras desde que estuvo en el camino de Basset, cuando Stephen las dijo una y otra vez, de modo casi

tan involuntario como si fuera un grito inarticulado. Philip no pudo oír nada, pero se había desplazado hacia el otro lado del piano y advirtió que Maggie se sobresaltaba y enrojecía, alzaba los ojos un instante hacia el rostro de Stephen y de inmediato los desviaba hacia él con expresión aprensiva. No advirtió que Philip había estado observándola, pero la sensación de estar ocultando algo le produjo una punzada de vergüenza e hizo que se levantara y se acercara a su madre para contemplar el juego del *cribbage*.

Philip no tardó en marcharse a su casa, sumido en un estado de terrible duda y desdichada certeza. Le resultaba imposible resistirse a la convicción de que había cierta complicidad entre Stephen y Maggie; y durante media noche, sus nervios irritables y susceptibles se vieron agitados hasta el frenesí por un hecho desgraciado: no daba con ninguna explicación en la que encajaran las palabras y los hechos de Maggie. Cuando, finalmente, la necesidad de creer en ella se impuso, como siempre, no estaba muy lejos de imaginar la verdad: Maggie estaba luchando, se desterraba de allí; ésa era la clave de todo lo que había visto desde su regreso. Pero junto a esta convicción, se alzaban otras posibilidades que no podía descartar. Su imaginación elaboró toda la historia: Stephen estaba locamente enamorado de ella; debía de habérselo dicho; ella lo había rechazado y por eso huía. ¿Pero estaría Stephen dispuesto a renunciar a Maggie sabiendo que —Philip no podía dejar de advertirlo con desesperación descorazonadora— sus sentimientos hacia él la dejaban casi indefensa?

Cuando llegó la mañana, Philip estaba demasiado enfermo para pensar en mantener el compromiso de ir en bote. En el estado de agitación en que se encontraba no podía decidir nada y oscilaba entre intenciones contradictorias. Al principio pensó que debía verse a solas con Maggie y rogarle que confiara en él; después pensó que no tenía derecho a inmiscuirse. Lo cierto era que había impuesto su presencia a Maggie desde el principio. Empujada por su juvenil ignorancia, Maggie había dicho algunas cosas, y el hecho de que él se las presentara siempre como un vínculo que los unía bastaría para que ella lo odiara. ¿Acaso tenía él algún derecho a pedirle que le revelara unos sentimientos que, sin duda, había intentado ocultarle? No se sentía capaz de verla hasta estar seguro de que se

comportaría empujado por la inquietud hacia ella y no por una irritación egoísta. Escribió una breve nota a Stephen y la envió temprano con un criado, diciendo que no se encontraba lo bastante bien para cumplir el compromiso con la señorita Deane y preguntándole si tendría la amabilidad de presentar sus excusas y ocupar su sitio.

Lucy había arreglado un plan encantador gracias al cual se alegraba de que Stephen se hubiera negado a ir en bote. Se había enterado de que su padre tenía intención de ir en coche hasta Lindum aquella mañana a las diez: y ella quería ir precisamente a Lindum para hacer unas compras, recados importantes que no podía retrasar para otra ocasión; y la tía Tulliver también debía ir, porque algunas de las compras tenían que ver con ella.

—De todos modos, no hay motivo para modificar el paseo en bote —dijo a Maggie cuando, después de desayunar, subían las escaleras—. Philip estará aquí a las diez y media y hace una mañana deliciosa. No digas ni una palabra en contra, doña tristezas. ¿De qué sirve que yo actúe de hada madrina si te opones a todas las maravillas que te ofrezco? No pienses en el horrible primo Tom: puedes desobedecerlo un poco.

Maggie no puso más objeciones. Casi le alegraba el plan; quizá le diera cierta fuerza y calma volver a estar de nuevo con Philip a solas: era como regresar al escenario de una vida más tranquila en la que todo combate parecía reposo comparado con el tumulto diario del presente. Se preparó para ir en bote y a las diez y media se sentó a esperar en el salón.

La llamada a la puerta fue puntual y pensaba con un placer entre triste y afectuoso en la sorpresa que se llevaría Philip al descubrir que iría solo con ella cuando distinguió unos pasos firmes y rápidos por el pasillo, que sin duda no pertenecían a Philip: se abrió la puerta y entró Stephen Guest.

Durante los primeros instantes, ambos se sintieron demasiado agitados para hablar, ya que Stephen sabía por la criada que los demás se habían ido. Maggie se levantó y se sentó mientras el corazón le latía con violencia, y Stephen, tras lanzar el sombrero y los guantes, se sentó a su lado en silencio. Maggie, creyendo que Philip no tardaría en llegar, con gran esfuerzo —puesto que temblaba visiblemente— se puso en pie para dirigirse a otra silla más alejada.

—No va a venir —dijo Stephen en voz baja—. Soy yo quien va en el bote.

—Oh, no podemos ir —exclamó Maggie, dejándose caer de nuevo en la silla—. No era eso lo que esperaba Lucy, se molestará. ¿Por qué no viene Philip?

—No se encuentra bien, me dijo que fuera yo en su lugar.

—Lucy ha ido a Lindum —dijo Maggie, quitándose el sombrero con dedos apresurados y temblorosos—. No debemos ir.

—Bien —dijo Stephen, mirándola con aire soñador, mientras descansaba el brazo en el respaldo de la silla—. Entonces, nos quedaremos.

Stephen contemplaba sus ojos tan profundos, lejanos y misteriosos como la oscuridad estrellada y, sin embargo, muy cercanos y tímidamente afectuosos. Maggie siguió totalmente inmóvil —tal vez durante unos instantes, quizá minutos— hasta que cesó el impotente temblor y se le encendieron las mejillas.

—El criado está esperando, ha llevado ya los cojines —dijo Maggie—. ¿Quieres ir a comunicárselo?

—¿Qué le digo? —preguntó Stephen, casi en un susurro, mirándole los labios.

Maggie no contestó.

—Vamos —murmuró Stephen, suplicante, levantándose y cogiéndole la mano para levantar a Maggie—. No nos queda mucho tiempo para estar juntos.

Y se fueron. Maggie sintió que una presencia más poderosa que ella misma la llevaba por el jardín entre las rosas, la ayudaba con firme ternura a subir al bote, le ponía un cojín y una capa sobre los pies y le abría la sombrilla (que ella había olvidado) sin que interviniera su voluntad, como estimulada por la repentina influencia exaltante de un fuerte tónico, y no sintió nada más. La memoria quedó excluida.

Se deslizaron rápidamente, empujados por los remos de Stephen y ayudados por la marea descendiente, pasaron junto a los árboles y las casas de Tofton, entre campos y pastos silenciosos y soleados que parecían llenos de una alegría natural que nada les reprochaba. El aliento del día joven e incansable, el golpeteo rítmico y delicioso de los remos, los retazos de los

cantos de los pájaros que pasaban, como el exceso de una alegría desbordante, la dulce soledad de la conciencia de ambos, mezclada en una sola a través de una mirada grave e incansable que no era necesario evitar… ¿Qué otra cosa pudo ocuparlos durante la primera hora? De vez en cuando, Stephen murmuraba alguna exclamación de amor en voz baja, contenida y lánguida mientras remaba sin esfuerzo, de modo mecánico. No decían nada más, porque las palabras habrían sido una vía hacia el pensamiento. Y el pensamiento sobraba en aquella neblina encantada que los envolvía, pertenecía al pasado y al futuro que quedaban fuera. Maggie apenas era consciente de la orilla junto a la que pasaban y no reconocía los pueblos. Sabía que debían dejar varios atrás antes de llegar a Luckreth, donde siempre se detenían y dejaban el bote. Era tan propensa a abstraerse que no resultó raro que dejara pasar los puntos de referencia sin fijarse en ellos.

Finalmente, Stephen, que había estado remando cada vez más perezosamente, dejó los remos, cruzó los brazos y se quedó mirando el agua, como si contemplara la velocidad del bote sin su ayuda. Este cambio repentino despertó a Maggie. Miró hacia los campos que se extendían hasta la lejanía, las orillas cercanas y se dio cuenta de que le eran totalmente desconocidos. Una terrible alarma se apoderó de ella.

—¡Oh! ¿Hemos pasado Luckreth, donde teníamos que parar? —exclamó mirando hacia atrás, para ver si distinguía el pueblo. No se veía. Se volvió de nuevo hacia Stephen con una mirada angustiada e interrogante.

Éste siguió contemplando el agua.

—Sí, hace ya mucho —dijo con voz extraña, soñadora y ausente.

—¡Oh! ¿Qué voy a hacer? —exclamó Maggie angustiada—. Tardaremos horas en regresar a casa… Y Lucy… ¡Dios mío, ayúdame!

Unió las manos y rompió a llorar como un niño asustado: no podía pensar en otra cosa que en el encuentro con Lucy y en su mirada de duda y dolorosa sorpresa, tal vez de justo reproche.

Stephen se sentó a su lado y suavemente le tomó las manos.

—Maggie —dijo lentamente, con voz grave y firme—. No volvamos a casa… hasta que nadie pueda separarnos… hasta que estemos casados. Aquel tono insólito y aquellas palabras sorprendentes pusieron fin a los sollozos de Maggie y ésta se quedó inmóvil, preguntándose si Stephen

habría pensado en algo que lo cambiara todo y borrara la desgraciada realidad.

—Maggie, mira cómo todo ha sucedido sin que lo buscáramos, a pesar de todos nuestros esfuerzos. Nunca habíamos pensado que pudiéramos volver a estar solos y juntos, ha sido obra de los demás. Mira cómo nos arrastra la corriente, lejos de esos vínculos antinaturales que hemos intentado anudar en vano en torno a nosotros. Nos llevará hasta Torby, allí podemos desembarcar, tomar un coche y huir hacia York y de ahí a Escocia, y no detenernos hasta que estemos unidos con un lazo que sólo la muerte puede romper. Es lo único que podemos hacer, vida mía, es la única manera de escapar de esta triste maraña. Todo nos ha llevado por este camino, no hemos tramado nada, nosotros no hemos pensado en ello.

Stephen hablaba con tono de súplica ardiente y profunda. Maggie lo escuchaba y pasaba del asombro al deseo de creer que todo era obra de la marea y que podía dejarse llevar por la rápida y silenciosa corriente, sin luchar más. Pero junto con esta furtiva influencia llegó la terrible sombra de los pensamientos pasados; y el súbito horror de que llegara ahora el momento de la fatal embriaguez provocó un sentimiento de furiosa resistencia contra Stephen.

—¡Déjame marchar! —exclamó agitada, lanzándole una mirada indignada e intentando liberarse las manos—. Has querido impedirme toda elección. Sabías que estábamos yendo demasiado lejos, te has atrevido a aprovecharte de mi descuido. No es digno de un caballero ponerme en semejante situación.

Herido por el reproche, Stephen le soltó las manos, regresó al lugar donde estaba antes y cruzó los brazos, desesperado ante la objeción de Maggie. Si ella se negaba a seguir adelante, debía maldecirse por haberla situado en semejante compromiso. El reproche era lo más insoportable; peor que separarse de ella era que creyera que se había comportado de modo impropio.

—No me di cuenta de que habíamos pasado Luckreth hasta que llegamos al siguiente pueblo —explicó con cólera contenida—, y entonces se me ocurrió que podríamos seguir adelante. No puedo justificarlo, debería habértelo dicho. Bastaría eso para que me odiaras, puesto que no me quieres

lo bastante como para que todo lo demás no te importe, como me sucede a mí. ¿Quieres que pare el bote e intente desembarcar allí? Le diré a Lucy que me volví loco y que me odias, y te librarás de mí para siempre. Nadie puede echarte la culpa de nada, porque me he comportado de manera imperdonable.

Maggie estaba paralizada: resultaba más fácil resistirse a los ruegos de Stephen que a aquella imagen de sufrimiento que acababa de trazar desagraviándola; era más fácil incluso alejarse de su expresión de ternura que de aquella actitud de sufrimiento y enfado que parecía situarla en una posición egoísta, distante. Tal como había descrito las cosas Stephen, las razones que habían actuado sobre la conciencia de Maggie parecían convertirse en egoísmo. El fuego indignado de sus ojos se apagó y empezó a mirarlo con tímida aflicción. Se había atrevido a reprocharle que se lanzara hacia un pecado irremediable… Ella, que había sido tan débil.

—Como si yo no sintiera lo que te ha sucedido —dijo ella con otro tipo de reproche: el reproche del amor que pide más confianza. Maggie se ablandaba ante el sufrimiento de Stephen y este sentimiento de compasión fue más fatal que otros, porque resultaba más difícil de distinguirlo de la conciencia de los derechos de los demás, base moral de su resistencia.

Stephen advirtió que su tono y su mirada se suavizaban: el cielo se abría de nuevo. Se sentó a su lado, le tomó la mano, apoyó el codo en el costado del bote y no dijo nada. No se atrevía a hablar, no se atrevía a moverse, no fuera a provocar sus reproches o su rechazo. La vida dependía de su consentimiento: todo lo demás era de una tristeza imposible, confusa, terrible. Siguieron deslizándose así, cobijados en aquel silencio como si fuera un puerto, temerosos de que sus sentimientos volvieran a enfrentarse, hasta que advirtieron que el cielo se había cubierto de nubes, la brisa refrescaba por momentos y el día cambiaba por completo.

—Maggie, seguro que tienes frío con este fino vestido. Permite que te tape los hombros con la capa. Levántate un poco, vida mía.

Maggie obedeció: resultaba indescriptiblemente agradable que le dijeran lo que tenía que hacer y que tomaran todas las decisiones por ella. Se sentó, cubierta por la capa, y Stephen asió de nuevo los remos para avanzar con energía; debían intentar llegar a Torby tan deprisa como pudieran. Maggie

apenas era consciente de haber hecho o dicho nada decisivo. Toda concesión va acompañada de una conciencia menor de la resistencia: es el sueño parcial del pensamiento, la inmersión de nuestra personalidad en otra. Todas las influencias tendían a arrullarla para convencerla: el paseo en aquel bote que se deslizaba como en sueños, que ya duraba cuatro horas y le producía ya cierto cansancio y agotamiento; la dificultad que suponía desembarcar a una distancia desconocida de su casa y caminar durante millas, todo contribuía someterla al poderoso y misterioso encanto que convertía la despedida de Stephen en la muerte de la alegría, que le hacía pensar que herirlo sería como el primer toque de un hierro torturador ante el cual cede toda resolución. Y, además, la felicidad de estar con él bastaba para absorber su lánguida energía.

En aquel momento, Stephen observó que tras ellos venía un barco. Con la primera marea habían pasado junto a ellos varias embarcaciones, entre ellas el vapor de Mudport, pero durante la última hora no habían visto ninguna. Stephen lo contempló con ansiedad, como si le trajera una idea, y después miró a Maggie vacilando.

—Maggie, querida mía —dijo por fin—. Si este barco fuera a Mudport o a cualquier otro lugar adecuado de la costa situada al norte, nos convendría pedirles que nos tomaran a bordo. Estás cansada y tal vez empiece a llover. Podría ser muy complicado llegar a Torby en este bote. Sólo es un mercante, pero imagino que podemos instalarnos cómodamente. Nos llevaremos los cojines del bote. Es lo mejor que podemos hacer. Estarán encantados de recogernos, llevo encima mucho dinero y puedo pagarles bien.

El corazón de Maggie latió con renovada alarma ante esta nueva proposición; pero permaneció en silencio: era igualmente difícil decidirse por un rumbo u otro.

Stephen hizo señas al barco. Era un buque holandés que se dirigía hacia Mudport, según les informó el oficial de cubierta, y si el viento se mantenía, tardarían menos de dos días.

—Nos hemos alejado demasiado con el bote —dijo Stephen—. Intentaba llegar a Torby, pero me da miedo el tiempo, y esta dama, mi

esposa, está agotada por el cansancio y el hambre. Le ruego que nos suban a bordo e icen el bote, les pagaré bien.

Maggie, que ahora temblaba de miedo, subió a bordo y se convirtió en interesante objeto de contemplación de los admirativos holandeses. El oficial de cubierta expresó su temor a que la dama no se encontrara cómoda en el barco, porque no estaban preparados para pasajeros tan inesperados y no tenían camarote particular del tamaño adecuado. Pero, por lo menos, contaban con la habitual limpieza holandesa que hace soportables todas las demás incomodidades, y esparcieron con presteza los cojines del bote para formar un lecho en la popa. Pero el primer cambio que necesitaba Maggie era pasear por la cubierta de un lado a otro apoyada en el brazo de Stephen, sentirse sostenida por su fuerza: después llegó la comida y, por último, se reclinó en silencio sobre los cojines con la sensación de que aquel día ya no se podía tomar ninguna otra decisión. Todo tenía que esperar hasta el día siguiente. Stephen se sentó a su lado y le tomó la mano; sólo podían hablarse en susurros y mirarse de vez en cuando, porque la curiosidad de los cinco hombres a bordo era persistente y el interés que sentían por aquellos desconocidos y apuestos jóvenes tardó en decrecer hasta alcanzar el habitual despreció que sienten los marineros por todos los objetos más cercanos que el horizonte. Pero Stephen sentía una alegría triunfante. Cualquier otro pensamiento o inquietud desaparecía ante la certeza de que Maggie debía ser suya. Habían dado ya el salto: los escrúpulos lo habían torturado, había luchado contra una poderosa inclinación, había dudado, pero ahora era ya imposible arrepentirse. Expresó en murmullos fragmentados la felicidad, la adoración, la ternura, la certeza de que la vida sería para los dos un paraíso, de que la presencia de Maggie a su lado daría pasión a la vida cotidiana, que no tendría mayor bendición que satisfacer sus menores deseos, que sería capaz de hacer por ella cualquier cosa, excepto alejarse: y, además, ahora nunca querrían separarse: él sería suyo para siempre, todo lo suyo sería de ella, y no tendría otro valor que el hecho de que fuera suyo. Cuando una voz grave y entrecortada que ha despertado la fibra de una pasión joven murmura tales cosas, causa un débil efecto sobre las personas experimentadas y distantes. Para la pobre Maggie, resultaban muy próximas: era como si sostuvieran un néctar junto a unos

labios sedientos: así pues, existía, tenía que existir en la tierra una vida para los mortales que no resultara dura y gélida, en la que el afecto no fuera sacrificio. Las apasionadas palabras de Stephen hacían la visión de semejante vida más presente que nunca; y ese futuro excluía todas las realidades, excepto los rayos de sol que brillaban de nuevo sobre las aguas a medida que se acercaba el crepúsculo y se mezclaban con la imaginada luz solar de la felicidad prometida, todo excepto la mano que asía la suya, la voz que le hablaba y los ojos que la miraban con un amor grave e indecible.

Al final no llovió; las nubes rodaron de nuevo hacia el horizonte y formaron la gran muralla purpúrea y las largas islas rojizas de ese maravilloso reino que se nos revela cuando se pone el sol: la tierra sobre la que vela el lucero de la tarde. Maggie dormiría toda la noche en la popa, estaría mejor que en la bodega, y la cubrieron con las mantas más cálidas que había en el barco. Era todavía temprano cuando el cansancio del día le produjo un soñoliento deseo de descansar, y recostó la cabeza mientras contemplaba cómo se extinguía el débil arrebol en el oeste, allí donde la única lámpara dorada se hacía cada vez más brillante. Después levantó la vista hacia Stephen, que seguía sentado a su lado, inclinado sobre ella mientras apoyaba el brazo en el costado de la embarcación. Detrás de todas las visiones deliciosas de las últimas horas, que habían fluido sobre ella como una suave corriente y la habían dejado completamente pasiva, existía la tenue conciencia de lo efímero de la situación y de que el día siguiente traería consigo la antigua vida de lucha, que algunos pensamientos se vengarían de aquel olvido. Sin embargo, en aquel momento todo era confuso: la suave corriente seguía fluyendo sobre ella y las deliciosas visiones se fundían y desvanecían como el maravilloso y etéreo reino de poniente.

Capítulo XIV

El despertar

Después de que Maggie se durmiera, Stephen, cansado también de tanto remar y de la intensa vida interior de las últimas doce horas, pero demasiado inquieto para dormir, caminó y vagó por cubierta, fumando, hasta pasada la media noche, sin ver las aguas oscuras y ajeno a las estrellas, interesado tan sólo en el futuro próximo y lejano. Finalmente, el cansancio venció a la inquietud y se envolvió en unas lonas, a los pies de Maggie.

Ésta se había dormido antes de las nueve y al cabo de seis horas, antes de que pudiera percibirse el menor indicio del amanecer estival, se despertó de uno de esos sueños tan vívidos que acompañan a los más profundos descansos. Se encontraba en un bote con Stephen, en mitad de las aguas, y en la creciente oscuridad aparecía algo similar a una estrella, que crecía y crecía hasta que advirtieron que era la Virgen, sentada en el bote de San Ogg. La barca fue acercándose hasta que vieron que la Virgen era Lucy y el barquero era Philip… No, no era Philip, sino Tom, que pasó remando junto a ella, sin mirarla; Maggie se levantó para extender los brazos y llamarlo y, debido al movimiento, la barca volcó y empezaron a hundirse, hasta que con un estremecimiento de temor creyó despertar y se encontró de nuevo en su infancia en el salón de su casa, al atardecer, y Tom no estaba enfadado. Del alivio del falso despertar pasó al verdadero, al chapoteo del agua contra el barco, al sonido de unos pasos sobre la cubierta y al terrible cielo estrellado. Transcurrieron unos momentos de total desconcierto antes de

que consiguiera desenmarañarse de la confusa red de sueños: pero pronto se impuso la terrible verdad. Stephen no estaba entonces a su lado: se encontraba sola con sus recuerdos y con su temor. Había cometido un error irrevocable que mancharía su vida para siempre; había llevado la tristeza a la vida de los demás, a unas vidas unidas a la suya por el amor y la confianza. Un sentimiento de apenas unas pocas semanas la había empujado hacia los pecados que su naturaleza más rechazaba: la deslealtad y el egoísmo cruel. Había roto los lazos que daban sentido al deber, y se había convertido en un alma proscrita sin más guía que la caprichosa elección de su pasión. ¿Y adónde la llevaría todo aquello? ¿Adónde la había llevado? Había dicho que preferiría morir que caer en aquella tentación. Ahora se daba cuenta, ahora que veía las consecuencias de su caída antes de que se completara. Aquel era, al menos, el fruto de tantos años de luchar por lo más alto y lo mejor: pues su alma, por muy traicionada, cautivada, atrapada que estuviera, nunca podría escoger deliberadamente lo más bajo. ¿Y qué era lo que elegía? Por Dios, no era la felicidad, sino una crueldad y una dureza deliberadas, porque ¿podría alguna vez dejar de ver ante sí a Lucy y a Philip, a cuya confianza y esperanza había puesto fin? Su vida con Stephen no podía ser sagrada: ella misma se hundiría y vagaría para siempre, movida por un impulso incierto; porque había dejado marchar el hilo de la vida, la hebra a la que, en tiempos lejanos, su joven necesidad se había aferrado con tanta fuerza. Entonces, antes de conocerlos, antes de que estuvieran a su alcance, había renunciado a todos los placeres: Philip tenía razón cuando le dijo que no sabía nada sobre la renunciación: ella creía entonces que era un éxtasis tranquilo; ahora veía cara a cara esa triste y paciente fuerza vital que contiene el hilo de la vida, y veía que las espinas se le clavarían siempre en la frente. El ayer que jamás podría borrarse… si pudiese cambiarlo por cualquier sufrimiento interno y silencioso, por largo que fuera, se habría inclinado bajo aquella cruz con sensación de alivio.

Llegó el amanecer y con él la luz rojiza del Este mientras su vida pasada se apoderaba así de ella, con el férreo abrazo propio de los momentos extremos, cuando todavía es posible el rescate. Vio a Stephen, tendido en la cubierta, profundamente dormido, y al mirarlo le invadió una oleada de angustia que estalló en forma de sollozo largo tiempo contenido. Lo más

amargo de la separación, el pensamiento que provocaba el más agudo grito interior en demanda de auxilio era el dolor que debía infligirle. Mas, por encima de todo, se encontraba el horror ante el fracaso, el temor a que su conciencia volviera a embotarse y careciera de energía hasta que fuera demasiado tarde. ¡Demasiado tarde! Era ya demasiado tarde para impedir el dolor, tal vez para todo lo que no fuera huir del último acto de bajeza: probar una alegría arrancada a unos corazones destrozados.

El sol se elevaba y Maggie se incorporó con la sensación de que empezaba para ella un día de resistencia. Todavía tenía lágrimas en las pestañas cuando, con la cabeza cubierta por el chal, se sentó para mirar el sol que se redondeaba lentamente. Algo despertó también a Stephen y, levantándose de su duro lecho, fue a sentarse a su lado. Le bastó una mirada para que el agudo instinto de su amor inquieto percibiera en ella algo alarmante. Lo asaltó el temor a encontrar en el carácter de Maggie una resistencia que fuera incapaz de vencer. Tuvo la incómoda conciencia de que el día anterior había despojado a Maggie de su libertad: Stephen poseía de modo innato demasiado honor para no advertir que si la voluntad de Maggie vacilaba, su conducta resultaría odiosa y ella tendría todo el derecho a reprochárselo.

Pero Maggie no pensaba en ese derecho: era demasiado consciente de su propia debilidad, estaba demasiado llena de la ternura que provoca la perspectiva de la necesidad de infligir una herida. Dejó que Stephen le tomara la mano cuando se acercó a sentarse a su lado y le sonrió con una mirada triste: no se sentía capaz de decir nada que lo apenara hasta que se acercara el momento de la posible separación. De manera que tomaron juntos una taza de café, caminaron por cubierta y oyeron la afirmación del capitán de que se encontrarían en Mudport a las cinco, mientras cada uno soportaba su carga: Stephen sentía un vago temor y confiaba en que las horas siguientes lo disiparan, y Maggie, tras tomar una decisión, intentaba en silencio hacerla más firme. Durante toda la mañana Stephen no dejó de manifestar su inquietud por el cansancio y las incomodidades que sufría Maggie, y aludió al desembarco, al cambio de medio de transporte y al reposo del que disfrutaría en un carruaje con el deseo de tranquilizarse completamente, dando por hecho que todo sucedería tal como él había

dispuesto. Durante un rato, Maggie se conformó con decirle que había descansado bien durante la noche y que no le importaba ir en barco —no era como estar en alta mar sino sólo un poco menos agradable que navegar en bote por el Floss—. Sin embargo, la mirada traiciona las decisiones ocultas y, a medida que avanzaba el día, Stephen se sentía más incómodo ante la sensación de que Maggie había abandonado por completo su pasividad. Ansiaba hablar de su matrimonio, aunque no se atrevía: de dónde irían después y de los pasos que daría para informar a su padre y a los demás de lo sucedido. Deseaba tranquilizarse con un asentimiento tácito, pero cada vez que la miraba, se asustaba aún más ante la expresión de tranquila tristeza que aparecía ahora en sus ojos. De modo que ambos se mostraban cada vez más silenciosos.

—Ya se ve Mudport —anunció Stephen finalmente—. Vida mía —añadió, volviéndose hacia ella con una mirada no exenta de súplica—: ya ha pasado lo más cansado. Una vez en tierra, podremos ir más deprisa. Dentro de hora y media podremos estar juntos en un coche y, después de esto, te parecerá un descanso.

Maggie comprendió que había llegado el momento de hablar, no sería justo asentir con su silencio.

—No iremos juntos —declaró en un tono tan bajo como el de Stephen pero firmemente decidida—. Viajaremos por separado.

La sangre afluyó al rostro de Stephen.

—No nos separemos: preferiría morir.

Tal como había temido, se avecinaba la lucha. Pero ninguno de los dos se atrevió a añadir una palabra hasta que arriaron el bote y los llevaron al embarcadero. Allí había un grupo de curiosos y pasajeros que aguardaba la partida del vapor hacia Saint Ogg's. Cuando desembarcó y Stephen avanzaba a toda prisa, tomándola por el brazo, Maggie tuvo la sensación de que alguien se le había acercado, como si quisiera hablar con ella. Pero Stephen tiraba de ella y Maggie era indiferente a todo, excepto a la dura prueba que la aguardaba.

Un mozo los guió hasta la posada y casa de postas más cercana, y Stephen pidió un coche mientras cruzaban el patio, sin que Maggie se diera cuenta.

—Pide que nos acompañen a una habitación donde podamos sentarnos —se limitó a decir.

Cuando entraron, Maggie no se sentó y Stephen, cuyo rostro manifestaba una desesperada decisión, estaba a punto de tocar la campanilla cuando Maggie anunció con voz firme.

—No voy contigo. Debemos separarnos aquí.

—Maggie —dijo Stephen, volviéndose hacia ella y hablando con el tono propio de un hombre que siente que se inicia un proceso de tortura—. ¿Quieres matarme? ¿De qué sirve que digas esto ahora? Ya está hecho.

—No, no todo está hecho —dijo Maggie—. Hemos hecho demasiado, demasiado para que podamos borrarlo. Pero no quiero seguir adelante. No intentes imponerte sobre mí. Ayer no pude escoger.

¿Qué podía hacer Stephen? No se atrevía a acercarse: podría provocar su enfado y alzar así otra barrera. Comenzó a pasear, preso de una perplejidad enloquecedora.

—Maggie —dijo al final, deteniéndose ante ella y hablando en un tono de triste súplica—: Ten piedad de mí, escúchame… Perdóname lo que hice ayer… Te obedeceré… No haré nada sin tu total consentimiento… Pero no arruines nuestra vida para siempre por una precipitada obstinación que nada bueno traerá para nadie, que sólo puede crear más mal. Siéntate, vida mía, y espera. Piensa en lo que vas a hacer. No me trates como si no pudieras confiar en mí.

Stephen había recurrido a la más eficaz de las súplicas; pero Maggie estaba decidida a soportar el dolor.

—No debemos esperar —dijo con voz baja, pero firme—. Debemos separarnos al instante.

—No podemos separarnos, Maggie —dijo Stephen, más impetuoso—. No puedo soportarlo. ¿Qué sentido tiene que me hagas tanto daño? El golpe, sea el que sea, ya se ha dado. ¿Le servirá a alguien que me vuelvas loco?

—No quiero empezar ningún futuro, ni siquiera por ti, accediendo a lo que no debería haber sucedido nunca —dijo Maggie temblorosa—. Sigo sintiendo lo mismo que te dije en Basset: preferiría haber muerto a haber

caído en esta tentación. Habría sido mejor que entonces nos separáramos para siempre. Sin embargo, debemos separarnos ahora.

—No, no nos separaremos —exclamó Stephen, colocándose ante la puerta instintivamente, olvidando todo lo que había dicho unos momentos antes—. No lo soportaría. No respondo de lo que haga.

Maggie se echó a temblar. Se dio cuenta de que no podían separarse repentinamente. Debía ir más despacio y apelar a los buenos sentimientos de Stephen, tenía que prepararse para una tarea más difícil que salir corriendo tras tomar la decisión. Se sentó. Stephen, mirándola con una expresión de desesperación que lo envolvía como un halo, se acercó lentamente desde la puerta, se sentó a su lado y le tomó la mano. El corazón de Maggie latió como el de un pájaro asustado; pero aquella franca oposición le fue de ayuda y sintió que su determinación se hacía más firme.

—Recuerda lo que sentías hace unas semanas —dijo ella con un ruego ferviente—, recuerda lo que sentíamos los dos: que nos debíamos a otros y que debíamos vencer toda inclinación que pudiera hacernos traicionar esa deuda. No hemos sido capaces de cumplir nuestra decisión, pero el mal es el mismo.

—No, no es lo mismo —dijo Stephen—. Hemos demostrado que nos es imposible mantenernos firmes en nuestras decisiones. Hemos demostrado que el sentimiento que nos atrae es demasiado fuerte y no podemos superarlo, que la ley natural domina a todas las demás, no podemos evitar los conflictos.

—No es eso, Stephen. Estoy segura de que está mal. He intentado pensar en ello una y otra vez, pero me doy cuenta de que si lo juzgamos desde ese punto de vista, sería argumento válido para cualquier traición y crueldad, podríamos justificar la ruptura de los lazos más sagrados que pueden formarse en la tierra. Si el pasado no nos atara, ¿en qué se basaría el deber? No habría más ley que el impulso del momento.

—Pero algunas veces no basta la voluntad para mantener los lazos —dijo Stephen, levantándose y poniéndose otra vez a pasear—. ¿Y de qué sirve la mera fidelidad externa? ¿Nos habrían agradecido algo tan vacío como la lealtad sin amor?

Maggie no contestó de inmediato. En ella, el debate no sólo era interior, sino también exterior. Por fin dijo, manifestando apasionadamente sus convicciones, tanto contra ella misma como contra él.

—De entrada, lo que dices parece correcto; pero si lo pienso más atentamente, me convenzo de que es falso. La fidelidad y la lealtad significan algo más que hacer lo que resulta más fácil y agradable para uno. Significan la renuncia a todo lo opuesto a la confianza que los demás han depositado en nosotros, a todo lo que podría causar tristeza a quienes el curso de la vida ha hecho depender de nosotros. Si nosotros… si yo hubiese sido mejor y más noble, habría tenido presentes esos derechos, los habría sentido presionar en mi corazón tan continuamente, como ahora, cuando mi conciencia está despierta, que nunca habría crecido en mí un sentimiento opuesto, tal como ha sido… Lo habría sofocado de inmediato… Habría rezado pidiendo ayuda con tanto fervor… Habría huido, como huimos de un terrible peligro. No encuentro ninguna excusa para mi comportamiento, ninguna. No habría fallado a Lucy y a Philip de esta manera si no hubiera sido débil, egoísta y dura, capaz de pensar en su dolor sin sentir otro dolor tan grande que habría destruido la tentación. ¡Oh! ¿Qué estará sintiendo Lucy? Ella creía en mí… me quería… era tan buena conmigo… Piensa en ella —la voz de Maggie fue ahogándose con estas palabras.

—No puedo pensar en ella —rechazó Stephen—. No puedo pensar en nada más que en ti. Maggie, pides a un hombre lo imposible. Todo lo que dices ya lo he sentido y ahora ya no puedo volver a sentirlo. ¿Y para qué sirve que te dediques a pensar en ello, excepto para torturarme? Ya no puedes evitarles ningún dolor, sólo puedes separarte de mí y hacer que ya no desee seguir viviendo. Aunque pudiéramos retroceder y cumplir con nuestros compromisos, suponiendo que eso todavía fuera posible, sería odioso, horrible pensar en que pudieras convertirte en la esposa de Philip, que fueras para siempre esposa de un hombre al que no amas. Ambos nos hemos salvado de un error.

Maggie se sonrojó profundamente y no pudo decir nada. Stephen lo advirtió. Se sentó de nuevo, le tomó una mano y la miró con apasionada súplica.

—¡Maggie! ¡Mi vida! Si me quieres, eres mía. ¿Quién puede tener más derecho que yo? Mi vida está atada a tu amor. Nada del pasado puede anular el derecho del uno al otro: por primera vez en nuestra vida, amamos en cuerpo y alma.

Maggie siguió en silencio durante un rato, con los ojos bajos. Stephen empezaba a albergar nuevas esperanzas de triunfar. Pero Maggie levantó los ojos y lo miró con la angustia del arrepentimiento, pero no la de la rendición.

—No, no en cuerpo y alma, Stephen —dijo con temerosa decisión—. Nunca di mi consentimiento de modo racional. Los recuerdos, afectos, deseos de alcanzar una bondad perfecta tienen tanto poder sobre mí que no podría olvidarlos durante mucho tiempo, regresarían y resultaría doloroso, llegaría el arrepentimiento. No podría vivir en paz si interpusiera la sombra de un pecado deliberado entre Dios y yo. Ya he causado pena, lo sé, me doy cuenta, pero no ha sido de modo deliberado. Nunca he dicho: «Que sufran para que yo sea feliz». Nunca ha sido mi voluntad casarme contigo: si consiguieras mi consentimiento en el momento del triunfo de mis sentimientos hacia ti, no tendrías toda mi alma. Si pudiera despertarme anteayer, preferiría ser fiel a mis plácidos afectos y vivir sin la alegría del amor.

Stephen le soltó la mano y, levantándose con impaciencia, caminó arriba y abajo por la habitación con rabia contenida.

—¡Por Dios! —estalló por fin—. ¡Qué poco vale el amor de una mujer! Yo sería capaz de cometer crímenes por ti y, mientras tanto, tú sopesas las cosas de ese modo. No me quieres: si me quisieras la décima parte de lo que yo te quiero a ti, te sería imposible pensar ni un solo momento en sacrificarme. Pero a ti no te importa nada despojar mi vida de toda felicidad.

Maggie apretó los dedos de modo casi convulsivo mientras mantenía las manos unidas sobre el regazo. Estaba aterrorizada, como si sólo pudiera divisar dónde se encontraba gracias a la luz de los relámpagos y, tras ellos, tuviera que tantear la oscuridad.

—No, no te sacrifico, no podría —dijo en cuanto pudo hablar de nuevo —, pero no creo que sea bueno para ti lo que considero…, lo que los dos

consideramos un daño para los demás. No podemos escoger entre nuestra felicidad o la de los demás, no podemos saber en qué consiste. Sólo podemos escoger entre ceder a nuestros deseos del presente o renunciar a ellos para obedecer a la voz divina que oímos en nuestro interior, para ser fieles a todos los motivos que santifican nuestras vidas. Ya sé que es duro creer en esto, me cuesta hacerlo; pero sé que si dejo de creer, ninguna luz me guiará por la oscuridad de esta vida.

—Pero Maggie —insistió Stephen, sentándose de nuevo a su lado—. ¿Es posible que no te des cuenta de que lo que sucedió ayer lo cambió todo? ¿Qué capricho, qué obstinado prejuicio te ciega? Es demasiado tarde para decir lo que podríamos o lo que deberíamos haber hecho. Aunque observemos lo hecho con los peores ojos, debemos partir de que nuestra posición ha cambiado y lo más adecuado ya no es lo mismo que antes. Debemos asumir nuestros actos y partir de ellos. ¿Y si nos hubiéramos casado ayer? Sería casi lo mismo. El efecto en los demás no habría sido distinto, sólo habría cambiado para nosotros, ya que entonces habrías reconocido que el vínculo que te unía a mí era más fuerte que el que te unía a los demás.

Maggie volvió a sonrojarse y guardó silencio. Stephen pensó de nuevo que empezaba a imponer su punto de vista: en realidad, nunca había pensado que pudiera dejar de imponerlo: algunas posibilidades no nos asustan porque no nos atrevemos siquiera a considerarlas.

—Mi vida —murmuró con el tono más tierno y profundo que fue capaz, inclinándose hacia ella y rodeándola con el brazo—. Ahora eres mía… el mundo lo cree así… nuestro deber debe partir de este hecho… Dentro de unas horas serás legalmente mi esposa. Y quienes tengan algún derecho sobre nosotros deberán rendirse, verán que se oponía una fuerza a sus derechos… Dame un beso, mi vida… Ha pasado tanto tiempo desde el último…

Los ojos de Maggie se abrieron con una mirada aterrorizada ante el rostro que tenía tan cerca y se levantó de un brinco, de nuevo pálida.

—¡Oh! No puedo —dijo con voz casi agónica—. Stephen… no me lo pidas… no insistas… No puedo discutir más… No sé qué es lo más razonable, pero mi corazón no me permitirá hacerlo. Me doy cuenta…

siento su inquietud: como si la tuviera grabada en la cabeza con un hierro candente. Yo sufrí y no tuve a nadie que se apiadara de mí… y ahora he hecho que los demás sufrieran. Nunca me abandonaría… me amargaría nuestro amor… Quiero a Philip de otro modo, recuerdo todo lo que nos dijimos… Sé que pensaba en mí como la promesa de su vida. Tuve la oportunidad de aliviar su destino… y lo he abandonado. Y he engañado a Lucy… a ella, que confiaba en mí más que nadie. No puedo casarme contigo. No puedo quedarme con un bien obtenido de su desgracia… Esa no es la fuerza que debería guiarnos… La que sentimos el uno por el otro… Me alejaría de todo lo que mi vida pasada ha hecho que apreciara. No puedo iniciar una nueva vida y olvidarlo… Debo regresar a ello y aferrarme, si no, me sentiría como si no pisara tierra firme.

—¡Por Dios, Maggie! —exclamó Stephen, levantándose también y agarrándola por el brazo—. Deliras: ¿cómo puedes volver sin casarte conmigo? No sabes lo que dirán, mi vida. No ves las cosas cómo son.

—Sí, sí las veo. Pero me creerán… Lo confesaré todo… Lucy me creerá… te perdonará. Y… y… si vamos por buen camino, las cosas irán bien. Querido Stephen… ¡Déjame marchar! No me arrastres a más remordimientos. Mi alma nunca ha dado su consentimiento y tampoco lo da ahora.

Stephen le soltó el brazo y se dejó caer en la silla, aturdido por la ira desesperada. Permaneció en silencio durante unos momentos, sin mirarla, mientras ella lo contemplaba inquieta y alarmada ante aquel repentino cambio.

—Adelante, entonces —dijo finalmente, sin mirarla—. Déjame. No me tortures más. No puedo soportarlo.

Involuntariamente, se inclinó hacia él y extendió la mano para tocarlo. Pero él se apartó como si fuera un hierro candente.

—Déjame.

Maggie no era consciente de tomar una decisión cuando se alejó de aquel rostro sombrío que miraba hacia otro lugar y salió de la habitación: era como un movimiento mecánico en respuesta a una intención ya olvidada. ¿Qué sucedió después? La sensación de bajar las escaleras como en un sueño… unas losas… el coche y los caballos que esperaban…

después una calle, el giro hacia otra calle, donde aguardaba una diligencia recogiendo pasajeros… y la idea repentina de que aquel carruaje se la llevaría, tal vez hacia casa. Pero no podía preguntar nada todavía: se limitó a subir al coche.

Su casa… donde estaban su madre y su hermano… Philip… Lucy… el escenario de sus cuitas y preocupaciones… era el refugio hacia el cual tendía su pensamiento… el santuario donde se guardaban las reliquias sagradas… donde impedirían que volviera a caer. Pensar en Stephen era como un terrible pulso doloroso que, sin embargo, como sucede con estos dolores, parecía estimular el pensamiento. Pero apenas tenía presente lo que otros pudieran decir o pensar de su conducta. El amor, la profunda pena y el angustiado remordimiento no dejaban lugar para ello.

El carruaje la llevaba hacia York, todavía más lejos de su casa, pero no se enteró hasta que se apeó en la vieja ciudad a medianoche. No importaba: podía dormir allí y ponerse en marcha hacia su casa al día siguiente. Llevaba el monedero en el bolso con todo su dinero: un billete y un soberano. Lo había olvidado allí tras ir de compras dos días antes.

¿Se acostó aquella noche en el lúgubre dormitorio de la vieja posada firmemente decidida a seguir el camino del sacrificio penitente? Los grandes combates de la vida no son tan sencillos; los grandes problemas no resultan tan claros. En la oscuridad de aquella noche, veía el apenado rostro de Stephen vuelto hacia ella, lleno de pasión y reproche. Revivía la trémula delicia de su compañía que convertía la existencia en un flujo de alegría en lugar de un esfuerzo firme y callado: el amor al que había renunciado regresaba a ella con un cruel encanto, sentía que abría los brazos para recibirlo otra vez y entonces parecía escabullirse, desvanecerse y esfumarse, dejando tras de sí el sonido de una voz profunda vibrante que decía: «Se ha ido… se ha ido para siempre».

Libro séptimo

El rescate final

Capítulo I

El regreso al molino

Entre las cuatro y las cinco de la tarde del quinto día tras aquel en que Stephen y Maggie partieron de Saint Ogg's, Tom Tulliver se encontraba de pie en el camino de grava que conducía hacia la vieja casa del molino de Dorlcote. Ahora era el dueño: había cumplido el deseo que había expresado su padre en el lecho de muerte y, gracias a años de trabajo enérgico y firme gobierno de sí mismo, estaba cerca de alcanzar una respetabilidad superior incluso a aquella que había sido orgulloso patrimonio de los Dodson y los Tulliver.

Pero mientras permanecía de pie bajo el sol todavía cálido de aquella tarde de verano, su rostro no reflejaba alegría ni triunfo. El gesto de la boca era de la mayor amargura, el severo ceño estaba profundamente fruncido mientras se echaba el sombrero sobre los ojos para protegerlos del sol y metía las manos en los bolsillos para empezar a caminar arriba y abajo por la gravilla. No había llegado noticia alguna de su hermana desde que Bob Jakin regresó en el vapor de Mudport y puso fin a todas las improbables suposiciones de un accidente en el agua al afirmar que la había visto desembarcar con el señor Guest. ¿Sería la siguiente noticia la de su matrimonio…? ¿O qué otra cosa? Probablemente, que no se había casado. Tom tendía a esperar lo peor: no la muerte, sino la deshonra.

Mientras caminaba dando la espalda a la verja y de cara a la impetuosa corriente del caz, una figura alta de ojos negros que bien conocemos se acercó a la puerta y se detuvo para mirarlo mientras el corazón le latía a

toda velocidad. Su hermano era el ser humano que más temía desde la infancia, sentía por él ese temor que experimentamos cuando amamos a una persona inexorable, inflexible, inalterable, con un carácter al que no podemos amoldarnos y de la que, sin embargo, no podemos alejarnos. Este miedo profundamente arraigado era el que agitaba a Maggie: a pesar de ello, estaba firmemente decidida a regresar con su hermano, como el refugio natural que le correspondía. Cuando recordaba su debilidad sentía tal humillación, tal angustia ante el daño infligido, que casi deseaba soportar la severidad de los reproches de Tom, someterse en silencio al juicio duro y reprobatorio contra el que se había rebelado tantas veces: ahora le parecía justo, ¿quién podría ser más débil que ella? Ansiaba la ayuda que pudiera derivarse de una confesión completa y dócil, de hallarse en presencia de aquellas personas cuya mirada y cuyas palabras fueran reflejo de su conciencia.

Maggie había tenido que permanecer postrada en la cama en York durante un día con un terrible dolor de cabeza, consecuencia lógica de la tensión del día anterior. Todavía se reflejaba el dolor físico en su frente y en sus ojos, y su aspecto entero, tras llevar el mismo vestido varios días, resultaba ajado y agotado. Alzó el pasador de la puerta de la verja y entró lentamente. Tom no la oyó, ya que en aquel momento estaba cerca del estruendoso dique; pero no tardó en darse la vuelta y, al levantar la vista, reparó en la figura agotada y solitaria, que le pareció una confirmación de sus peores conjeturas. Se detuvo, tembloroso y pálido de repugnancia e indignación.

Maggie también se detuvo a tres yardas de distancia. Advirtió la expresión del rostro de Tom, vibró con su odio, pero se sintió en la obligación de hablar.

—Tom —empezó débilmente—. He vuelto contigo… He vuelto a casa…, a buscar refugio, a contártelo todo.

—No tengo intención de ofrecerte un hogar —contestó Tom con temblorosa rabia—. Nos has avergonzado a todos, has deshonrado el nombre de mi padre. Has sido una maldición para tus parientes más próximos. Te has comportado con bajeza, has engañado, nada te detiene. Me desentiendo de ti para siempre, no eres nada mío.

Su madre había salido a la puerta y aguardaba, paralizada ante la doble impresión de ver a Maggie y oír a Tom.

—Tom —insistió Maggie con más valor—. Tal vez no sea tan culpable como tú crees. Nunca quise expresar mis sentimientos, luché contra ellos. Me vi arrastrada en el bote demasiado lejos para regresar el martes, y he vuelto tan pronto como he podido.

—Nunca más podré creer en lo que digas —dijo Tom, pasando gradualmente de la temblorosa agitación del principio a la fría inflexibilidad —. Has mantenido una relación clandestina con Stephen Guest, igual que hiciste antes con otro hombre. Fue a verte a casa de la tía Moss; paseaste sola con él por los caminos. Debes de haberte comportado como no lo habría hecho una muchacha decente con el novio de su prima; de no ser así, nada de esto habría sucedido. La gente de Luckreth te vio pasar, pasaste por delante de los otros pueblos; sabías lo que hacías. Has estado utilizando a Philip Wakem como tapadera para engañar a Lucy, la mejor amiga que has tenido nunca. Ve a ver el modo en que se lo has devuelto: está enferma, es incapaz de hablar; ni siquiera nuestra madre puede acercarse a ella, porque se acuerda de ti.

Maggie estaba aturdida y demasiado angustiada para advertir ninguna diferencia entre su culpa real y las acusaciones de su hermano, y más incapaz todavía de defenderse.

—Tom dijo, —retorciéndose las manos bajo la capa mientras se esforzaba en hablar—, me arrepiento amargamente de todo lo que pueda haber hecho… Quiero reparar el daño causado… Soportaré lo que sea… No quiero volver a equivocarme.

—¿Y qué va a impedírtelo? —preguntó Tom con cruel amargura—. No te lo impedirán la religión, ni el sentido del honor o de la gratitud. Y él… merecería un tiro, si no fuera… Pero tú eres diez veces peor que él. Odio tu carácter y tu conducta. Dices que has luchado contra tus sentimientos. ¡Sí! Yo también he luchado contra los míos, pero he vencido. Mi vida ha sido mucho más dura que la tuya, pero yo me he consolado cumpliendo con mi deber. No pienso tolerar un carácter como el tuyo: el mundo sabrá que yo sí distingo entre el bien y el mal. Si pasas necesidades, me ocuparé de ti. Puedes comunicárselo a nuestra madre. Pero no te alojarás bajo mi techo.

Ya basta con que tenga que soportar el pensamiento de tu deshonra, tu vista me resulta odiosa.

Maggie iba dándose la vuelta lentamente, llena de desesperación. Pero el pobre y asustado amor materno, más fuerte que cualquier temor, se precipitó a intervenir.

—¡Hija mía! Me voy contigo, siempre seré tu madre.

¡Oh, el dulce reposo de ese abrazo para la desgraciada Maggie! Es de más ayuda un sorbo de simple piedad humana que toda la sabiduría del mundo.

Tom dio media vuelta y entró en la casa.

—Entra, hija mía —susurró la señora Tulliver—. Dejará que te quedes y duermas en mi cama. Si se lo pido no me lo podrá negar.

—No, madre —contestó Maggie con una voz grave que parecía un gemido—. No quiero entrar nunca más.

—Entonces, espérame fuera. Me preparo y voy contigo.

Cuando apareció su madre con la capota puesta, Tom le salió al encuentro en el pasillo y le puso dinero en la mano.

—Mi casa siempre será la suya, madre —dijo—. Venga para contarme todo lo que quiera, vuelva conmigo.

La pobre señora Tulliver tomó el dinero, demasiado asustada para decir nada. Lo único que estaba claro para su instinto materno era que se iba con su desgraciada hija.

Maggie esperaba en el exterior de la verja; cogió la mano de su madre y caminaron un poco en silencio.

—Madre —dijo Maggie finalmente—, iremos a la casita de Luke; él me dejará entrar. Era muy bueno conmigo cuando era pequeña.

—Hija, no tiene sitio para nosotros; su mujer ha tenido muchos hijos. No sé adónde ir, como no sea a casa de una de tus tías… y casi no me atrevo —dijo la pobre señora Tulliver, desprovista de recursos mentales en aquel momento extremo.

Maggie permaneció en silencio un rato.

—Vamos a casa de Bob Jakin, madre —dijo—; si no tiene ahora otro huésped, su esposa tendrá sitio para nosotras.

De modo que se encaminaron a Saint Ogg's, a la vieja casa situada junto al río.

Bob se encontraba en su casa, sumido en una tristeza que se resistía incluso a la felicidad y el orgullo de ser padre de una criatura de dos meses, la más alegre de esa edad que príncipe o buhonero hayan tenido nunca. Tal vez no habría llegado a entender por completo lo irregular de la aparición de Maggie con el señor Guest en el muelle de Mudport si no hubiera presenciado el efecto que la noticia causó en Tom cuando fue a comunicársela; y, desde entonces, las circunstancias que daban un carácter catastrófico a la fuga habían trascendido los círculos más educados de Saint Ogg's y se habían convertido en tema de conversación para mozos de cuadra y chicos de los recados. Por este motivo, cuando abrió la puerta y vio a Maggie delante de él, triste y fatigada, no tuvo que preguntar nada; sólo tenía una pregunta, pero ésa no se atrevió a formularla en voz alta. ¿Dónde estaba el señor Guest? Él, por su parte, esperaba que se encontrara en la zona más caliente de un lugar situado en el otro mundo y destinado a los caballeros que se comportaban de tal modo. Las habitaciones estaban vacías y las dos señoras Jakin, tanto la grande como la pequeña, recibieron la orden de arreglarlas para la «Señora y la señorit»…. ¡Ay! Que todavía era «señorit». El ingenioso Bob se sentía dolorosamente intrigado por cómo podía haberse llegado a ese resultado, cómo el señor Guest podía haberla dejado o podía haber permitido que se alejara de él teniendo la posibilidad de retenerla. Pero permaneció en silencio y no quiso permitir que su esposa hiciera pregunta alguna; no quiso presentarse en la habitación, no fuera a parecer que se entrometía y deseaba satisfacer su curiosidad; y se comportó con la muchacha de ojos negros con la misma caballerosidad que en la época en que le hizo el memorable regalo de aquellos libros.

Sin embargo, al cabo de un día o dos, la señora Tulliver se fue al molino durante unas horas para ocuparse de los asuntos domésticos de Tom. Maggie había insistido en que lo hiciera: tras el primer estallido violento de sentimientos, que se produjo en cuanto ya no tuvo que ocuparse de nada, ya no le fue tan necesaria la presencia de su madre; incluso deseaba estar sola con su pena. Sin embargo, llevaba poco rato sola en el viejo salón cuando

llamaron a la puerta. Volvió el triste rostro para decir «adelant» y vio entrar a Bob con la pequeña en brazos y con Mumps pisándole los talones.

—Si le molestamos, nos vamos, señorita —dijo Bob.

—No —dijo Maggie en voz baja, deseando poder sonreír.

Bob, tras cerrar la puerta a sus espaldas, se le acercó y se detuvo ante ella.

—¿Ve, señorita?, tenemos una nena. Quería que la mirara y la cogiera en brazos, si tiene la bondad. Porque nos hemos tomado la libertad de darle su nombre, y se lo digo *pa* que lo sepa.

Maggie no podía hablar, pero tendió los brazos para coger a la criatura mientras Mumps olfateaba inquieto con intención de asegurarse de que el cambio era correcto. El corazón de Maggie se había henchido con el gesto. Y las palabras de Bob: sabía bien que era el modo que había elegido para demostrarle su comprensión y su respeto.

—Siéntate, Bob —dijo después, y Bob se sentó en silencio. Cosa nueva, su lengua no se dejaba manejar y se negaba a decir lo que él quería.

—Bob —dijo Maggie al cabo de un momento, mirando a la nena y sosteniéndola inquieta, como si temiera que pudiera deslizarse de su pensamiento y de sus dedos—, quisiera pedirte un favor.

—No hable así, señorita —dijo Bob, agarrando a *Mumps* por la piel del cuello—. Si puedo hacer algo por *usté*, me gustará tanto como el jornal de un día.

—Quisiera que fueras a ver al doctor Kenn, hablaras con él y le dijeras que estoy aquí y que le agradecería mucho que viniera a verme mientras mi madre está fuera. No volverá hasta la noche.

—Ajá, señorita. Dicho y hecho. Está aquí al *lao*; pero la señora Kenn está de cuerpo presente, mañana la entierran… Se murió el día en que llegué de Mudport. Es una pena que *s'*haya muerto ahora, si quiere hablar con él. No me gustaría molestarlo todavía…

—¡Oh, no, Bob! —exclamó Maggie—. Debemos dejarlo tranquilo, por lo menos durante unos días, hasta que oigas decir que vuelve a encargarse de las cosas. Aunque quizá se vaya de la ciudad, un poco lejos —añadió, sintiéndose de nuevo abatida.

—Él no es *asin*, señorita —dijo Bob—. No irá a ningún sitio. No es *d'*esos que se van a llorar a un balneario cuando se les muere la mujer: tiene otras cosas que hacer. Se ocupa de la parroquia. Bautizó a la nena y *me s'*acercó *pa* preguntarme qué hacía los domingos, ya que no iba a la iglesia. Le dije que estaba fuera tres de cada cuatro, y que estoy tan *acostumbrao* a estar de pie que no puedo aguantar sentado tanto rato seguido. «Pardiez, señor —voy y le digo— a un buhonero le basta con un poco de iglesia, el sabor es fuerte —le digo yo— y no es bueno pasars». Eh, señorita, ¡qué bien se porta la nena con *uste*! Es como si la conociera. En parte, la conoce, estoy seguro, como los pájaros conocen la mañana.

No cabía duda de que la lengua de Bob se había liberado de su involuntaria inmovilidad, e incluso corría el riesgo de hacer más trabajo del necesario. Sin embargo, era tan difícil acercarse a los temas sobre los que ansiaba estar informado que su lengua antes tendía a seguir el camino fácil que a llevarlo por un sendero intransitado. Al advertirlo, permaneció un rato más en silencio, rumiando sobre los distintos modos de plantear la pregunta.

—¿Me permite que *l'*haga una pregunta? —dijo finalmente, con voz más tímida que de costumbre.

Maggie se sorprendió un poco.

—Sí, Bob —contestó—. Si es sobre mí, pero no sobre los demás.

—Bien, señorita, ¿guarda rencor a alguien?

—No, a nadie —contestó Maggie, alzando los ojos hacia él con curiosidad—. ¿Por qué?

—Pardiez, señorita —dijo Bob, pellizcando el pescuezo de *Mumps* con más fuerza que nunca—. Que si tiene rencor a alguien y me lo dice, le doy de palos hasta quedarme ciego, y que *aluego* la justicia haga conmigo lo que quiera.

—¡Oh, Bob! —dijo Maggie sonriendo débilmente—. Eres muy buen amigo. Pero no quiero castigar a nadie, aunque me hayan hecho daño. Yo he hecho daño a los demás demasiadas veces.

Este punto de vista desconcertó a Bob y lanzó más oscuridad que nunca sobre lo que podía haber sucedido entre Stephen y Maggie. Pero habría sido indiscreto seguir haciendo más preguntas, suponiendo que hubiera sido

capaz de darles la forma adecuada, y debía llevar a la nena con la madre, que la aguardaba.

—A lo mejor le gustaría tener a *Mumps pa* que le haga compañía, señorita —dijo después de cogerle a la niña—. Hace buena compañía, este *Mumps… Lo* sabe *tó* y no molesta *ná*. Si se lo digo, se quedará delante de *usté* y la vigilará, bien quieto, igual que me vigila el fardo. Permita que se lo deje un rato, así le tomará cariño. Es buena cosa que le tenga cariño a uno un animal mudo; hace compañía y está bien callao.

—Sí, déjamelo, por favor —contestó Maggie—. Me parece que me gustaría que fuera amigo mío.

—*Mumps*, quieto aquí —dijo Bob, señalando un lugar delante de Maggie—. Y no te muevas hasta que te lo digan.

Mumps se echó al instante y no mostró inquietud alguna cuando su amo salió de la habitación.

Capítulo II

Saint Ogg's juzga

Pronto se supo en todo Saint Ogg's que la señorita Tulliver había vuelto: así pues, no se había fugado para casarse con el señor Guest —en cualquier caso, el señor Guest no se había casado con ella—, lo que era lo mismo, en lo que a la culpabilidad de la señorita Tulliver concernía. Juzgamos a los demás por los resultados, ¿cómo podría hacerse de otro modo, si no conocemos el proceso a través del cual se ha llegado a esos resultados? Si la señorita Tulliver, tras unos pocos meses de selecto viaje, hubiera regresado como la señora de Stephen Guest, con un ajuar posnupcial y todas las ventajas que posee incluso la menos deseada esposa de un hijo único, la opinión pública, que en Saint Ogg's, como en todas partes, siempre sabe lo que tiene que pensar, habría juzgado ateniéndose estrictamente a esos resultados. La opinión pública, en esos casos, es siempre del género femenino, y la mitad femenina de la humanidad habría contemplado cómo dos jóvenes guapos —él además, miembro de la que se podría considerar la familia más destacada de Saint Ogg's—, tras haber dado un paso en falso, habían avanzado por un camino que, para decirlo con palabras suaves, era altamente imprudente y habían causado gran tristeza y decepción, especialmente a aquella dulce joven, la señorita Deane. Sin duda, el señor Guest no se había comportado correctamente; pero ya se sabe que los jóvenes varones son dados a este tipo de caprichos… Y aunque pareciera muy poco adecuado que la señora Guest hubiera aceptado las menores insinuaciones del novio de su prima (se decía que, en realidad, estaba

entonces comprometida con el joven Wakem: el viejo Wakem en persona lo había mencionado), ella era muy joven… «¡Y con un muchacho deforme hay que ver! El joven Guest es tan fascinante y, según dicen, la adoraba de tal manera (¡seguro que no dura!), que huyeron en el bote contra la voluntad de ella. ¿Y qué iba ella a hacer? No podía volver, nadie le habría dirigido la palabra. Y qué bien le sienta a su tez ese raso de color amarillo pálido: parece como si los pliegues delanteros estuvieran de moda; varios de sus vestidos los llevan. Dicen que a él nada le parece demasiado hermoso para ella. ¡Pobre señorita Deane! Es digna de lástima, pero, al fin y al cabo, no había compromiso en firme y el aire de la costa le sentará bien. Después de todo, si eso era todo lo que el joven Guest sentía por ella, ha sido mejor para ella no casarse con él. ¡Qué buena boda para una muchacha como la señorita Tulliver! ¡Qué romántica! Vaya, el joven Guest se presentará por la ciudad a las próximas elecciones parlamentarias. ¡Hoy en día no hay nada como el comercio! Ese joven Wakem casi se volvió loco —siempre ha sido bastante raro—, pero se ha marchado otra vez al extranjero para quitarse de en medio: es casi lo mejor para un joven deforme. La señorita Unit afirma que nunca visitará al señor y la señora Guest, ¡qué tontería ésa la de pretender ser mejor que los demás! No podría haber vida en sociedad si nos entrometiéramos así en la vida privada; además, el cristianismo nos dice que no pensemos mal: y yo creo que lo que pasa es que la señorita Unit no ha recibido ninguna tarjeta suya».

Sin embargo, sabemos que el resultado no fue tal que permitiera semejante atenuación del pasado. Maggie había regresado sin ajuar y sin marido, en la lamentable y vagabunda situación a la que, como bien se sabe, conduce el error; y el sector femenino de la humanidad, con este sutil instinto que se le ha concedido para la conservación de la sociedad, advirtió de inmediato que la conducta de la señorita Tulliver contaba con todo tipo de circunstancias agravantes. ¿Había algo peor que aquello? Una chica que tanto debía a sus parientes… Que tanto ella como su madre habían recibido tantas atenciones de los Deane… Maquinar para robar el afecto de un joven a su propia prima, que se había comportado como una hermana para ella… No era ésa la expresión adecuada para una muchacha como la señorita Tulliver: habría sido más correcto decir que se había comportado con un

descaro impropio de una mujer, movida por una pasión desenfrenada. La verdad era que siempre había habido algo dudoso en ella: esa relación con el joven Wakem que, según decían, hacía años que duraba, resultaba muy reprensible, ¡incluso repugnante! ¡En una joven de semejante temperamento! Para la mitad femenina del mundo, un instinto refinado podía advertir que algo había en el mismo físico de la señorita Tulliver que no auguraba nada bueno. En cuanto al pobre señor Guest, era más digno de conmiseración que otra cosa: en estos casos, no se puede juzgar con severidad a un joven de veinticinco años que se encuentra a merced de las artimañas de una fresca. Y estaba claro que había cedido contra su voluntad: se libró de ella en cuanto pudo; en realidad, no decía nada bueno de ella que se hubieran separado tan pronto. Naturalmente, él había escrito una carta echándose toda la culpa y contando la historia desde un punto de vista romántico para intentar que ella pareciera inocente, ¡faltaría más! Pero no se podía engañar al refinado instinto del mundo femenino, ¡afortunadamente! Si no, ¿qué sería de la sociedad? Vaya, si su propio hermano ni siquiera le había permitido entrar en su casa: no cabía duda de que, antes de hacer semejante cosa, ya habría visto suficiente. Un joven respetable de pies a cabeza, ese señor Tulliver, ¡era muy probable que subiera muy alto! Sin duda, la deshonra de su familia era para él un golpe muy duro. Era de esperar que ella se fuera por ahí, a América o a cualquier otro sitio, para purificar el aire de Saint Ogg's de la deshonra de su presencia, ¡resultaba muy peligrosa para las hijas de todos los habitantes de Saint Ogg's! Nada bueno podría sucederle: sólo podía esperarse que se arrepintiera y que Dios se apiadara de ella. Pero Él no tenía a su cargo la sociedad, como temía la mitad femenina del mundo.

El fino instinto necesitó casi quince días para comprobar la veracidad de estas intuiciones; lo cierto fue que la carta de Stephen tardó una semana entera en llegar y en ella contaba a su padre los hechos y añadía que había navegado hasta Holanda, que había pedido dinero al agente de Mudport, y que era incapaz de tomar ninguna decisión en aquel momento.

Entre tanto, Maggie estaba demasiado llena de una agónica inquietud para dedicar un instante al modo en que se interpretaba su conducta en Saint Ogg's: la inquietud por Stephen, por Lucy, por Philip luchaba en su pobre

corazón en una tormenta incesante y torrencial en la que se mezclaban el amor, la pena y los remordimientos. Si hubiera pensado en el rechazo y en la injusticia, le habría parecido que le habían hecho todo el daño posible, pero que ningún golpe le resultaba ya insoportable tras las palabras que había oído de los labios de su hermano. Entre la inquietud por los amados y ofendidos, aquellas palabras se le repetían una y otra vez, como una horrible punzada que habría llevado tristeza y temor incluso a un delicioso paraíso. Ni le pasó por la cabeza la posibilidad de recuperar la felicidad; le parecía como si todas sus fibras sensibles estuvieran absortas en el dolor y no pudieran volver a vibrar bajo otra influencia. Ante ella, se extendía la vida como un acto de penitencia, y lo único que ansiaba cuando pensaba en lo que le deparaba el futuro era algo que le impidiera volver a caer: su debilidad la acosaba como una visión de horribles posibilidades que no le permitía concebir otra paz que la que reside en un refugio seguro.

Sin embargo, no carecía de planes prácticos: el amor a la independencia constituía una herencia y una costumbre demasiado fuertes para que no recordara que debía ganarse el pan y, cuando los demás proyectos resultaron demasiado vagos, pensó en volver a coser y ganar así lo suficiente para alojarse en casa de Bob. Tenía intención de convencer a su madre de que no tardara en regresar al molino para vivir de nuevo con Tom; y, de un modo u otro, se mantendría en Saint Ogg's. Quizá el doctor Kenn pudiera ayudarla y aconsejarla: recordaba las palabras de despedida en la feria benéfica, la breve sensación de confianza que le produjo su conversación, y aguardaba con ansia el momento de confiárselo todo. Su madre pasaba cada día por casa de los Deane para saber cómo se encontraba Lucy: las noticias eran siempre tristes y nada la sacaba del estado de débil pasividad en que había caído desde que se enteró de la noticia. En cuanto a Philip, la señora Tulliver no sabía nada: evidentemente, las personas que veía no le hablaban de nada relacionado con su hija. A pesar de todo, la señora Tulliver por fin reunió valor suficiente para ir a visitar a su hermana Glegg, que, sin duda, lo sabría todo e incluso había ido a ver a Tom al molino en su ausencia, aunque éste no le había contado nada de lo sucedido en esa ocasión.

En cuanto se marchó su madre, Maggie se puso la capota. Había decidido ir andando hasta la rectoría y preguntar si podía ver al doctor

Kenn: éste estaba profundamente apenado, pero las penas de los demás, en estas circunstancias, no desentonan con las nuestras. Era la primera vez que salía desde su regreso; con todo, estaba tan decidida que no se le ocurrió pensar en lo molesto de encontrarse a alguien por el camino y ser objeto de sus miradas. Pero apenas había salido de las calles estrechas que debía cruzar desde la casa de Bob cuando advirtió que le lanzaban miradas extrañas; nerviosa, apresuró el paso sin atreverse a mirar a izquierda o derecha. No tardó en encontrarse frente a frente con la señora y la señorita Turnbull, viejas amistades de su familia; ambas la miraron con una expresión extraña y se apartaron un poco sin dirigirle la palabra. A Maggie le dolían todas estas duras miradas, pero era tanto lo que se reprochaba que apenas podía ofenderse: no le sorprendía que no quisieran hablar con ella, pensaba: apreciaban mucho a Lucy. Al poco, tuvo que pasar ante un grupo de caballeros apostados delante de la puerta del salón de billar y no pudo dejar de ver que el joven Torry se apartaba un poco, con el monóculo puesto, y la saludaba con la actitud informal que habría dedicado a una moza de taberna que se mostrara simpática con él. El orgullo de Maggie era demasiado intenso para no advertir semejante aguijón, incluso a través de la pena; y por primera vez se le ocurrió pensar que pesaba sobre ella otro oprobio que el que le correspondía por haber traicionado a Lucy. Pero se encontraba ya en la rectoría; tal vez allí hallara algo más que un castigo. Cualquier voz puede castigar: el pilluelo más duro, cruel y embrutecido de la calle puede, infligir castigo. Sin duda, la ayuda y la compasión son cosas infrecuentes y por ello es más necesario que las otorguen los justos.

Tras anunciar su llegada, la hicieron pasar de inmediato al estudio del doctor Kenn, que se encontraba sentado entre pilas de libros que poco le interesaban, con la mejilla apoyada sobre la cabeza de su hija menor, una niña de tres años. Hizo salir a la niña con la criada y, cuando se cerró la puerta, el doctor Kenn acercó una silla para que se sentara Maggie.

—Tenía intención de ir a verla, señorita Tulliver. Se ha adelantado usted, y me alegro de que así sea.

Maggie lo miró con la misma franqueza infantil que en la venta de beneficencia.

—Quiero contárselo todo —anunció Maggie, pero se le llenaron los ojos de lágrimas y toda la emoción contenida durante el humillante camino se abrió paso antes de que pudiera decir nada más.

—Cuéntemelo todo —rogó el doctor Kenn con serena amabilidad en su voz firme y grave—. Piense en mí como en una persona que posee gran experiencia, lo cual le permite ayudarla.

Con frases inconexas y con cierto esfuerzo al principio, pero después con la facilidad que procede de la sensación de alivio que supone confiarse a alguien, Maggie le contó la breve historia de una lucha destinada a ser el principio de una larga pena. El doctor Kenn se había enterado del contenido de la carta de Stephen la misma víspera, y se lo había creído sin necesidad de que Maggie se lo confirmara. Recordaba el involuntario lamento de Maggie —«tengo que irme»— como señal de que soportaba algún conflicto interno.

Maggie se extendió sobre los sentimientos que la habían hecho volver con su madre y su hermano, que hacían que se aferrara a los recuerdos del pasado. Cuando terminó, el doctor Kenn permaneció en silencio unos minutos, pensando en un asunto difícil Se puso de pie y paseó de un lado a otro, frente a la chimenea, con las manos a la espalda.

—El impulso de acudir a los parientes más cercanos —dijo finalmente tras sentarse, mirando a Maggie—, de permanecer donde se han formado los lazos de su vida, es un impulso verdadero, ante el cual la Iglesia responde, de acuerdo con sus principios, abriendo los brazos al penitente y acogiendo hasta el último de sus hijos, y no los abandona a menos que sean réprobos sin remedio. Y la Iglesia debería representar los sentimientos de la comunidad, de manera que toda la parroquia fuera una familia unida por una hermandad cristiana bajo un padre espiritual. Pero las nociones de disciplina y de fraternidad cristiana están totalmente relajadas, apenas se puede decir que existan en el espíritu de la gente: apenas sobreviven, excepto en la forma parcial y contradictoria que han tomado en las reducidas comunidades cismáticas; y si no poseyera una fe firme en que la Iglesia debe, a la larga, recuperar un valor tan adecuado a las necesidades humanas, muchas veces me desanimaría al contemplar la falta de fraternidad y sentido de responsabilidad mutua en mi propio rebaño.

Actualmente, todo parece tender hacia la relajación de los lazos, hacia la sustitución de las obligaciones ancladas en el pasado por las elecciones caprichosas. Su conciencia y su corazón le han indicado el buen camino en este punto, señorita Tulliver; y le digo todo esto para que sepa cuáles serían mis deseos, mis consejos, si se derivaran de mis sentimientos y de mi opinión, sin tener en cuenta otras circunstancias adversas.

El doctor Kenn hizo una pequeña pausa. No había la menor benevolencia efusiva en sus modales; la gravedad de su aspecto y de su voz resultaba casi fría. Si Maggie no hubiera sabido que su benevolencia era proporcional a su reserva se habría sentido helada y asustada. En aquel momento, escuchó con atención, segura de que sus palabras la ayudarían.

—Su inexperiencia en relación con el mundo, señorita Tulliver —prosiguió el doctor Kenn—, le impide prever las ideas tremendamente injustas que probablemente se habrán formado en relación con su conducta, ideas que tendrán un efecto funesto, aunque vayan contra las pruebas.

—Sí, ya he empezado a darme cuenta —dijo Maggie, incapaz de ocultar el dolor que acababa de sentir—. Sé que me insultarán, que creerán que soy peor de lo que soy.

—Tal vez no sepa todavía —dijo el doctor Kenn, mostrando un poco de piedad personal—, que ha llegado una carta que debería dar por satisfecho a todo aquel que ha tenido noticias de usted, en la cual se dice que usted escogió el camino difícil y abrupto en el momento en que más difícil era el regreso.

—¡Oh! ¿Dónde está Stephen? —exclamó la pobre Maggie, ruborizándose con un temblor que ninguna presencia habría podido impedir.

—Se ha ido al extranjero; le ha contado a su padre todo lo que sucedió. La ha defendido por completo, y espero que el contenido de esa carta tenga un efecto beneficioso sobre su prima.

Antes de proseguir, el doctor Kenn aguardó a que Maggie se calmara.

—Esa carta, tal como le he dicho, debería ser suficiente para impedir que la gente se formara una impresión falsa sobre usted. Pero debo decirle, señorita Tulliver, que no sólo la experiencia de toda mi vida, sino también lo que he observado durante los últimos tres días me hacen temer que pocas pruebas podrán salvarla de las falsas acusaciones. Las personas más

incapaces de mantener una lucha tenaz como la suya son precisamente las que, con toda probabilidad, se alejarán de usted basándose en un juicio injusto, porque no creerán que haya mantenido lucha alguna. Me temo que si sigue viviendo aquí no sólo sufrirá mucho, sino que topará con muchos obstáculos. Por ese motivo, y sólo por ése, le digo que considere la posibilidad de buscar un empleo lejos de aquí, tal como era antes su intención. Me ocuparé de inmediato de buscarle uno.

—¡Oh, desearía quedarme aquí! —dijo Maggie—. No tengo ánimos para empezar a vivir en otro lugar. Me sentiría sin soporte alguno, como una vagabunda, separada de mi pasado. He escrito a la señora que me ofrecía un empleo para rechazarlo con una excusa. Si me quedo, quizá pueda expiar el daño que le he hecho a Lucy, a los demás. Podría convencerlos de que lo siento. Y —añadió con algo de su antiguo orgullo— no quiero irme porque la gente diga mentiras sobre mí. Deberán aprender a retractarse. Y si tengo que irme porque… porque otros lo deseen, no será ahora mismo.

—Bueno —dijo el doctor Kenn tras reflexionar un poco—, si está decidida, señorita Tulliver, puede contar con que ejerceré toda la influencia que me confiere mi posición. Como párroco, debo ayudarla y respaldar su decisión. Añadiré que también siento un profundo interés personal en su paz de espíritu y su bienestar.

—Lo único que quiero es un trabajo que me permita ganarme el pan y ser independiente —dijo Maggie—. No necesitaré mucho, puedo seguir alojada donde estoy.

—Pensaré más despacio sobre esto —dijo el doctor Kenn— y dentro de unos días seré más capaz de valorar la opinión general. Iré a verla y la tendré presente en mi pensamiento.

Cuando Maggie se marchó, el doctor Kenn permaneció de pie, pensativo, con las manos a la espalda y los ojos clavados en la alfombra, con una dolorosa sensación de duda y dificultad. El tono de la carta de Stephen, que había leído, y el relato de las personas concernidas lo habían convencido de que la boda tardía entre Stephen y Maggie podría ser un mal menor; y la imposibilidad de que convivieran en Saint Ogg’s en cualquier otra circunstancia, a menos que fuera tras años de separación, dificultaba enormemente la permanencia de Maggie. Por otra parte, entendía —con

toda la comprensión de un hombre que ha conocido el conflicto espiritual y ha vivido largos años de devoto servicio a sus semejantes— el estado del corazón y la conciencia de Maggie, los cuales le hacían considerar su consentimiento a ese matrimonio como una profanación. No debían forzar la conciencia de Maggie: en realidad, se había guiado por principios más altos que el deseo de arreglar las consecuencias. La experiencia le decía que la intervención era una responsabilidad demasiado incierta para abordarla a la ligera: la decisión entre intentar restablecer las relaciones con Lucy y Philip o aconsejarle que se dejara llevar por el nuevo sentimiento se escondía en una oscuridad tanto más impenetrable cuanto que cada paso quedaba cegado por el mal.

El gran problema de la fluctuante relación entre la pasión y el deber no tiene solución: no tenemos una respuesta general que diga cuándo un hombre ha ido más allá de la posibilidad de renunciar y debe aceptar el dominio de una pasión contra la que ha luchado como si fuera un pecado. Los casuistas se han convertido en sinónimo de reproche, pero su pervertido espíritu de discriminación los aproxima a una verdad ante la que los ojos y los corazones muchas veces se hallan fatalmente ciegos. Lo cierto es que los juicios morales son falsos y huecos a menos que los ilumine una referencia constante a las circunstancias especiales que señalan la suerte individual.

Las gentes de inteligencia abierta y sólida sienten una repugnancia instintiva por los hombres partidarios de las máximas, porque bien pronto advierten que las frases grandilocuentes no pueden contener la misteriosa complejidad de nuestra vida, y que encerrarnos en fórmulas de esta clase supone reprimir todas las inspiraciones y e impulsos divinos que surgen de la comprensión y la intuición. Y el hombre de máximas es el representante popular de los talantes que guían sus juicios morales únicamente por reglas generales con la idea de que éstas los conducirán a la justicia con un método de esquemas previos, sin la molestia de aplicar la paciencia, el discernimiento y la imparcialidad, sin asegurarse de si poseen la intuición que procede de un análisis penoso de la tentación o de una vida rica e intensa que ha generado un amplio espíritu de camaradería hacia todo lo humano.

Capítulo III

En donde se demuestra que las viejas amistades
pueden sorprendernos

Cuando Maggie se encontró de nuevo en casa, su madre le comunicó la inesperada actitud de la tía Glegg. Mientras no hubo noticias de Maggie, la señora Glegg entornó los postigos y echó las persianas, convencida de que Maggie se había ahogado: eso le parecía más probable que el que su sobrina y heredera hubiera hecho nada que pudiera herir a su familia en lo más vivo. Cuando, finalmente, supo por Tom que Maggie había regresado a casa y dedujo de sus palabras de qué modo explicaba Maggie su ausencia, reprochó severamente a Tom que tendiera a pensar lo peor de su hermana sin nada que lo forzara a ello. Si uno no apoya a los suyos y defiende su honor, por escaso que éste sea, entonces, ¿qué defiende? Los Dodson nunca se habían apresurado a reconocer que un miembro de la familia hubiera actuado de modo tal que exigiera un cambio de testamento; y aunque la señora Glegg siempre había augurado que Maggie acabaría mal, en una época en que otros tal vez fueran menos perspicaces, el respeto a la justicia era fundamental y no sería ella quien ayudara a despojar a la muchacha de su fama ni la echara del refugio familiar a la calle hasta que llegara a ser de modo inequívoco la vergüenza de la familia. La señora Glegg no podía recordar precedente alguno, nada como aquello había sucedido antes entre los Dodson; sin embargo, en ese caso su rectitud hereditaria y su fortaleza de carácter formaban causa común con su espíritu clásico, y de igual manera influían en la equidad mostrada en los asuntos monetarios. Discutió

con el señor Glegg, cuya amabilidad, convertida en compasión por Lucy, hacía que sus juicios sobre Maggie fueran tan duros como los del mismo señor Deane y, echando chispas contra su hermana por no haber acudido a ella de inmediato en busca de consejo y ayuda, de la mañana a la noche se encerró en su habitación con el *Descanso eterno de los santos* de Baxter y se negó a recibir ninguna visita, hasta que el señor Glegg le trajo la noticia, conocida a través del señor Deane, de la carta de Stephen. Entonces la señora Glegg sintió que ya tenía un terreno adecuado sobre el que pelear, relegó a Baxter y se dispuso a recibir todas las visitas que llegaran. Mientras la señora Pullet era incapaz de hacer otra cosa que mover la cabeza y llorar, y desear que hubiera muerto el primo Abbot o que se hubieran producido una serie de funerales antes que aquel acontecimiento, tan insólito que nadie sabía cómo actuar, y que, además, le impedía volver a ir a Saint Ogg's porque sus «amistade» lo sabían todo, la señora Glegg sólo esperaba que la señora Wool o cualquier otra apareciera para visitarla con sus historias falsas sobre su sobrina, porque sabría muy bien qué decirle a esa persona tan mal informada.

De nuevo volvió a reprochárselo a Tom y se mostró tanto más severa cuanto que su posición actual era más poderosa. Pero Tom, como otros objetos inamovibles, cuanto más intentaban conmoverlo más rígido parecía. ¡Pobre Tom!, juzgaba a partir de lo que había podido ver y ese juicio le resultaba muy doloroso. Creía que tenía ante sí la demostración de unos hechos, aparentemente indiscutibles, que había observado a lo largo de los años con sus propios ojos: Maggie era, por naturaleza, totalmente indigna de confianza y sus malas tendencias eran demasiado fuertes para que nadie pudiera tratarla con indulgencia. Estaba decidido a actuar en consecuencia, costara lo que costara, aunque la mera idea hacía sus días más amargos. Tom, como cualquiera de nosotros, vivía preso entre los límites de su carácter, y la educación le había resbalado por encima, dejando un simple barniz. Lector, si te sientes inclinado a juzgar con dureza la severidad de Tom, debes recordar que la responsabilidad de la tolerancia sólo corresponde a quienes poseen mayor amplitud de miras. Tom había empezado a sentir por Maggie cierta repulsión cuya misma intensidad se derivaba del temprano amor infantil, cuando entrelazaban los diminutos

dedos, y de la posterior sensación de unión en una pena y un deber comunes: tal como le había dicho, no podía soportar siquiera su presencia. La tía Glegg encontró en esta rama de la familia Dodson un carácter más fuerte que el suyo; en éste, el sentimiento familiar había perdido el carácter de clan para adquirir un profundo matiz de orgullo personal. La señora Glegg concedía que había que castigar a Maggie —no era mujer para negarlo, ya que sabía cómo debía comportarse uno—, pero la pena debería estar en proporción con las fechorías demostradas y no con las acusaciones que lanzaban algunas personas ajenas a la familia, tal vez empujadas por el deseo de demostrar que su familia era mejor.

—Tu tía Glegg *m'*ha regañado como nunca, hija, por no haber ido a verla antes —dijo la pobre señora Tulliver cuando regresó junto a Maggie —; *m'*ha dicho que no era cosa suya venir a verme primero. De todos modos, ha hablado como una hermana: siempre lo ha sido ¡Y bien difícil de contentar! Pero ha sido la persona que mejor *t'*ha tratado hasta el momento, hija. Dice que aunque le molesta mucho hacer algo *estraordinario* en su casa, sacar cubiertos y cosas y cambiar de costumbres, tendrás un refugio en su casa si vas a ella sin olvidar cuáles son tus deberes, y que te defenderá contra esas personas que hablan mal de ti sin motivo. Y le he dicho que creía que no podías ver a nadie más que a mí, de lo triste que estabas, pero *m'*ha dicho: «No le haré reproches: bastante dispuestos están a hacerlo quienes no son de la familia. Pero le daré buenos consejos, y debe mostrarse humild». Qué bien, porque te aseguro que antes me reprochaba todo lo que hacía mal, fuera que el vino se había agriado o que las empanadas estaban demasiado calientes, cualquier cosa.

—¡Oh, madre! —exclamó la pobre Maggie, estremeciéndose ante la mera idea de tener que relacionarse con alguien—. Dígale que se lo agradezco mucho, que iré a verla en cuanto pueda, pero por ahora no puedo ver a nadie más que al doctor Kenn. He ido a verlo; me aconsejará y me ayudará a conseguir algún empleo. No puedo vivir con nadie ni depender de nadie, dígaselo a la tía Glegg. Debo ganarme el pan. Pero ¿ha oído alguna noticia sobre Philip… Philip Wakem? ¿Alguien le ha hablado de él?

—No, hija mía; pero he ido a casa de Lucy y he visto a tu tío, y dice que *l'*han leído la carta, que escuchó a la señorita Guest y le hizo preguntas, y el

médico cree que va mejor. ¡Qué mundo éste! ¡Qué líos! Todo empezó con el pleito y ahora, de repente, todo va de mal en peor, justo cuando la suerte parecía ir a cambiar.

Era la primera vez que la señora Tulliver se quejaba delante de Maggie, pero la visita a su hermana Glegg había hecho revivir la vieja costumbre.

—¡Pobre madre mía! —exclamó Maggie abrazándola, profundamente apenada y arrepentida—. Siempre he sido mala y le he dado mucha guerra. Y ahora, si no fuera por mi culpa, podría haber sido feliz.

—¡Mi niña! —contestó la señora Tulliver, inclinándose hacia la mejilla cálida y joven—. Es mi obligación ocuparme de mis hijos, no tendré más. Y si me traen mala suerte, pues me conformo. No tengo mucho más, ya que mis muebles desaparecieron hace tiempo. Y tú eras muy buena, ¡no sé por qué todo ha ido tan mal!

Pasaron dos o tres días más y Maggie siguió sin noticias de Philip: la inquietud por él empezaba a ser el sentimiento predominante y finalmente hizo acopio de valor con intención de preguntárselo al doctor Kenn la siguiente vez que fuera a verla. Éste no sabía siquiera si Philip estaba en su casa: las inquietudes hacían que el viejo Wakem se mostrara taciturno: a la decepción con el joven Jetsom, por el que al parecer sentía aprecio, había seguido la catástrofe de las esperanzas de su hijo después de haber accedido a sus sentimientos y de mencionar imprudentemente esa concesión en Saint Ogg's. Ahora, cuando alguien le preguntaba sobre su hijo, contestaba con una brusquedad casi violenta. Pero no era probable que estuviera enfermo, ya que se habría sabido, puesto que habrían llamado al medico: seguramente habría partido de la población por una temporada. Maggie enfermaba de inquietud y su imaginación empezó a vivir cada vez con más intensidad lo que Philip estaba soportando. ¿Qué pensaría de ella?

Por fin Bob le trajo una carta sin matasellos y en las letras de su nombre reconoció la mano de su autor: la misma que, mucho tiempo atrás, lo había escrito en una edición de bolsillo de Shakespeare que ella poseía. Su madre se encontraba en la habitación y Maggie, tremendamente agitada, corrió escaleras arriba para poder leerla a solas. Mientras sentía en la frente los latidos del corazón, leyó lo siguiente:

Maggie: Creo en ti. Sé que nunca tuviste intención de engañarme. Sé que has intentado ser fiel, a mí y a todos. Lo creía antes de tener ninguna otra prueba que tu propio carácter. La noche del último día en que te vi fue una tortura: había visto algo que me había convencido de que no eras libre, que había otra persona cuya presencia tenía un poder sobre ti que la mía nunca ha poseído; pero a través de todas las explicaciones de rabia y celos, casi asesinas, la razón se impuso para creer en tu sinceridad. Me convencí de que querías serme fiel, tal como habías dicho; que habías rechazado a esa persona, que luchabas por renunciar a él, por Lucy y por mí. Pero no pude dar con *ninguna* salida *que no resultara fatal para ti, y ese temor excluyó toda resignación. Preví que él no renunciaría a ti y creí entonces, como creo ahora, que la fuerte atracción que os unió procedía sólo de un lado de vuestro carácter Y pertenecía a esa acción parcial y dividida de nuestra naturaleza que origina la mitad de la tragedia del destino humano. He sentido que en tu naturaleza vibraban unas cuerdas de las que él carecía. Pero quizá me equivoque, quizá te vea como el artista mira la escena sobre la que ha meditado amorosamente: temblaría ante la idea de que fuera confiada a otras manos, no podría creer que para otra persona tuviera el mismo significado y la misma belleza que para él.*

Aquella mañana no me atreví a verte, estaba lleno de una pasión egoísta, destrozado por una noche de delirio consciente. Te dije hace tiempo que no me resignaba siquiera a la mediocridad de mis capacidades: ¿cómo iba a resignarme a la pérdida de lo único que he tenido en este mundo con la promesa de una alegría profunda que daría un sentido nuevo y bendito al dolor sufrido; la promesa de otro yo que elevara mi doloroso afecto al éxtasis divino de una necesidad siempre renovada y siempre satisfecha?

Sin embargo, los sufrimientos de aquella noche me prepararon para lo que sucedió antes de la siguiente. No me sorprendió. Estaba seguro de que él se había impuesto para convencerte de que lo dejaras todo por él, y esperé con igual certeza la noticia de vuestro matrimonio. Medía tu amor y el suyo a partir del mío. Pero me equivoqué, Maggie. Hay en ti algo más fuerte que el amor que sientes por él.

No te diré lo que pasé durante el intervalo. Pero incluso en la agonía más extrema, incluso durante las terribles dolores que debe sufrir el amor antes de desprenderse de todo deseo egoísta, mi amor por ti bastó por sí solo para alejarme del suicidio. A pesar de todo mi egoísmo, no quería aparecer como un fantasma de la muerte en mitad de tu felicidad no podía soportar la idea de abandonar el mundo en el que todavía vivías y podrías necesitarme: esperar y soportar formaba parte de la lealtad que te había prometido. Eso es prueba, Maggie, del motivo de mi carta: ninguna pena que haya tenido que sufrir por ti ha sido un precio excesivo a cambio de la nueva vida que he conocido al amarte. No quiero que sufras por el dolor que puedas haberme causado. Me acostumbré desde niño a la privación: nunca esperé ser feliz y al conocerte, al amarte, he conseguido algo, todavía hoy, que me reconcilia con la vida. Has sido para mis sentimientos lo que la luz, lo que los colores son para los ojos, lo que es la música para el oído: has convertido una débil inquietud en una vívida conciencia. La nueva vida que he encontrado al preocuparme por tus penas y alegrías más que por las mías ha transformado un débil murmullo rebelde en la resistencia deliberada que da luz a una profunda afinidad. Creo que sólo un amor tan completo e intenso podría haberme iniciado en esta vida más amplia, que sigue creciendo cuando hacemos propia la vida de los demás; antes vivía encerrado en una omnipresente y dolorosa timidez. Incluso algunas veces pienso que este don que he adquirido al amarte puede ser para mí una nueva capacidad.

Así pues, querida mía, a pesar de todo, has sido la bendición de mi vida. No te reproches nada por mí. Debería ser yo quien se reprochara el haberte impuesto mis sentimientos y haberte forzado a decir unas palabras que luego has sentido como grilletes. Querías ser fiel a esas palabras y lo has sido: puedo medir tu sacrificio por lo que aprendí a tu lado en solo media hora cuando soñaba que podrías quererme. Sin embargo, Maggie, no tengo derecho a pedirte otra cosa que un afectuoso recuerdo.

Durante unos días no me he atrevido a escribirte, porque no quería imponerte tampoco mi presencia y repetir así mi error original. Pero tú no me malinterpretarás. Sé que debemos mantenernos separados durante mucho tiempo; las lenguas crueles, entre otras cosas, nos separarían. Pero

no me iré. Aunque viaje, mis pensamientos seguirán contigo. Y recuerda que sigo siendo tuyo, tuyo con una devoción que excluye los deseos egoístas.

Que Dios te ayude, mi querida y bondadosa Maggie. Por mucho que los demás tengan de ti una idea equivocada, recuerda que nunca ha dudado de ti quien conoció tu corazón hace diez años.

Si te dicen que estoy enfermo porque no me ven salir, no te lo creas. Sólo he tenido dolores de cabeza de origen nervioso, no peores que los que he sufrido en otras ocasiones. Con todo, este tremendo calor me obliga a pasar el día inmóvil. Me encuentro lo bastante bien como para obedecerte en cuanto me digas que me necesitas para hacer o decir lo que sea.

Tuyo hasta el fin,

Philip WAKEM

Cuando Maggie se arrodilló junto a la cama, sollozando, abrazada a la carta, sus sentimientos se expresaron una y otra vez en un susurro.

—¡Oh, Dios mío! ¿Acaso existe alguna felicidad en el amor que pueda hacerme olvidar el dolor de los demás?

Capítulo IV

Maggie y Lucy

Hacia finales de la semana, el doctor Kenn había llegado ya a la conclusión de que sólo de una manera podía asegurar a Maggie una vida adecuada en Saint Ogg's. A pesar de sus veinte años de experiencia como párroco, le horrorizaba la obstinada insistencia en acusarla a pesar de todas las pruebas. Hasta la fecha, se había sentido más adorado y solicitado de lo que le resultaba agradable; sin embargo, ahora que intentaba abrir los oídos de las mujeres a la razón y sus conciencias a la justicia en favor de Maggie Tulliver, advertía que se encontraba tan indefenso como si hubiera pretendido influir en la forma de los sombreros. Nadie podía llevar la contraria al doctor Kenn y lo escuchaban atentamente en silencio; pero si, en cuanto salía de la habitación, se comparaban las opiniones de sus oyentes con las que sostenían momentos antes, se podía observar que no se había producido el menor cambio. Era innegable que la señorita Tulliver se había comportado de modo reprensible: ni siquiera el doctor Kenn lo negaba, ¿cómo podía, pues, mostrarse tan indulgente e interpretar todo lo que había hecho de modo tan favorable? Aunque se partiera de la suposición más crédula, a saber, que nada de lo que se decía de la señorita Tulliver era cierto, desde el momento en que se había dicho, la joven había quedado envuelta en una mala fama tal que toda mujer que quisiera cuidar de su reputación y de la sociedad debía alejarse de ella. Para tomar a Maggie de la mano y decirle: «No creeré nada malo que se diga de usted sin pruebas: mis labios no lo repetirán; mis oídos permanecerán cerrados para no oírlo. Yo

también soy mortal y puedo equivocarme, tropezar y fracasar en mis esfuerzos más ardientes. Ha tenido usted peor suerte que yo, mayores tentaciones. Ayudémonos a mantenernos en pie y caminar sin más tropiezo», habría hecho falta valor, piedad, conocimiento de sí mismo, generosa confianza; un espíritu que no encontrara placer en el chismorreo, que no se exaltara con la condena ajena, que no se engallara con la idea de que la vida tiene un fin moral ni con una religión que excluyera la lucha por la verdad, la justicia y el amor hacia los hombres y mujeres que se cruzan en nuestro camino. Las señoras de Saint Ogg's no se dejaban seducir por nociones especulativas; no obstante, tenían una abstracción favorita, llamada sociedad, que servía para tranquilizar su conciencia mientras hacían lo que satisfacía su egoísmo: pensar y decir lo peor de Maggie Tulliver y darle la espalda. A buen seguro, para el doctor Kenn resultó decepcionante que, después de recibir incienso superfluo durante dos años de sus parroquianas, ahora éstas tuvieran un punto de vista contrario y lo mantuvieran incluso frente a una autoridad mayor que la del doctor Kenn y a la que veneraban desde mucho tiempo atrás. Esta autoridad había dado una respuesta muy explícita a quienes querían saber dónde empezaban sus deberes sociales, y esta respuesta no aludía al bien último de la sociedad, sino a «cierto hombr» que padeció y fue marginado.

Sin duda, en Saint Ogg's había mujeres con conciencia y corazón tiernos: probablemente, en la misma proporción que en cualquier otra pequeña ciudad comercial de la época. Pero hasta que todo hombre bueno sea también valiente, debemos esperar que la mayoría de las buenas mujeres sean tímidas: incluso demasiado para creer en la rectitud de sus mejores tendencias cuando éstas las sitúan en minoría. Y no todos los hombres de Saint Ogg's eran valientes, ni mucho menos: incluso a algunos les gustaban los escándalos y, hasta cierto punto, eso habría dado a su conversación un carácter afeminado si ésta no se hubiera distinguido por las bromas masculinas y un encogerse de hombros ante los odios entre mujeres. Los varones de Saint Ogg's compartían la idea de que no había que interferir en las relaciones femeninas.

Así pues, todos los intentos del doctor Kenn para procurar algún tipo de reconocimiento o empleo para Maggie le decepcionaron. La esposa de

James Torry no quiso ni pensar en tomar a Maggie como institutriz, ni siquiera temporalmente: una joven de la que «se habían dicho cosas semejante» y sobre la cual «bromeaban los caballero»; y la señorita Kirke, que tenía dolores de columna y deseaba alguien que le leyera y le hiciera compañía, declaró estar segura de que Maggie poseía un carácter con el que ella, por su parte, no deseaba arriesgarse a tener el menor trato. ¿Y por qué la señorita Tulliver no aceptaba el refugio que le ofrecía su tía Glegg? No correspondía a una chica como ella rechazarlo. O, mejor aún, ¿por qué no se iba de allí y encontraba un trabajo donde nadie la conociera? (Al parecer, no era grave que pudiera llevar sus peligrosas tendencias a familias desconocidas en Saint Ogg's). Debía de ser muy fresca y muy dura para desear quedarse en una parroquia donde tanto se la miraba y se murmuraba de ella.

El doctor Kenn, que poseía gran firmeza de carácter, ante esta oposición, como cualquier otro hombre firme, tomó una determinación que iba incluso más allá de lo previsto. Necesitaba una institutriz que se ocupara de sus hijos pequeños durante el día y, aunque al principio dudó en ofrecer el puesto a Maggie, lo decidió la intención de protestar con toda la fuerza de su autoridad personal y sacerdotal contra las calumnias que la marginaban. Maggie aceptó, agradecida, un empleo que suponía unos deberes y un apoyo igualmente importantes: ahora tendría los días ocupados y las noches solitarias serían un descanso bien recibido. Ya no necesitaba que su madre se sacrificara quedándose con ella y convenció a la señora Tulliver de que regresara al molino.

Sin embargo, la gente empezó a advertir que el doctor Kenn, que tan ejemplar parecía hasta el momento, tenía sus cosillas y, probablemente, sus debilidades. El sector masculino de Saint Ogg's sonrió con cierta simpatía y manifestó que no le sorprendía que a Kenn le gustara ver un par de hermosos ojos todos los días o que se mostrara inclinado a juzgar el pasado con tanta indulgencia; el sector femenino, que en aquel periodo parecía menos poderoso, adoptó un punto de vista más triste. ¿Y si aquella señorita Tulliver conseguía cautivar al doctor Kenn y hacer que se casara con ella? Una no podía confiar ni en el mejor de los hombres, incluso un apóstol cayó y después lloró amargamente; y aunque las negativas de San Pedro no

constituían un precedente muy exacto, era probable que sí lo fuera el arrepentimiento.

No hacía más de tres semanas que Maggie acudía cada día a la rectoría cuando ya se había especulado tanto confidencialmente sobre la terrible posibilidad de que un día u otro se convirtiera en la esposa del rector que algunas damas empezaban a hablar de cómo deberían comportarse con ella llegado el caso. Porque, al parecer, una mañana el doctor Kenn pasó media hora en la sala mientras la señorita Tulliver daba clase —¡qué va!, si estaba presente todas las mañanas—. Y en una ocasión la acompañó a su casa —no, la acompañaba casi cada día—, y, si no, iba a verla al final de la tarde. ¡Qué astuta era! ¡Qué madre para aquellos niños! La señora Kenn se estremecería en su tumba ante la idea de que aquella muchacha se ocupara de sus hijos a las pocas semanas de su muerte. ¿Habría perdido el doctor Kenn toda decencia hasta el punto de casarse antes de que transcurriera un año de su muerte? El sector masculino, sarcástico, pensaba que casarse, no se casaría antes del año.

Las señoritas Guest vieron como un alivio a su pena la locura del rector: al menos así su hermano estaría a salvo; la tenacidad de Stephen era continua fuente de temores para ellas, no fuera a regresar para contraer matrimonio con Maggie. Ellas no se encontraban entre quienes no habían prestado oídos a la carta de su hermano; pero no confiaban en que Maggie se mantuviera firme en su renuncia. Sospechaban que se había acobardado ante la huida, pero no ante el matrimonio, y que permanecía en Saint Ogg's con la esperanza de que él regresara a buscarla. Siempre les había parecido desagradable: ahora la tenían por astuta y orgullosa; probablemente, tenían tan buenos motivos para pensarlo como el lector y yo tenemos para otras opiniones similares. Aunque al principio no les había entusiasmado el matrimonio con Lucy, ahora el temor de un matrimonio entre Stephen y Maggie añadía fuerza a la sincera pena e indignación que sentían en nombre de la dulce muchacha abandonada y deseaban que regresara con ella. En cuanto Lucy pudiera salir de casa, iría a la costa a buscar alivio del opresivo calor de agosto con las señoritas Guest; y éstas tenían el proyecto de convencer a Stephen para que se uniera a ellas. A la primera insinuación de

un chismorreo en relación con Maggie y el doctor Kenn, las señoritas Guest se apresuraron a comunicárselo por carta a su hermano.

A través de su madre, de la tía Glegg o del doctor Kenn, Maggie tenía noticias frecuentes de la lenta recuperación de Lucy y sus pensamientos tendían continuamente hacia la casa de su tío Deane: ansiaba conversar con Lucy, aunque sólo fuera durante cinco minutos, pronunciar palabras de arrepentimiento, que los ojos *y* los labios de Lucy le aseguraran que no creía que aquellos que amaba y en quienes confiaba la habían traicionado deliberadamente. Pero sabía que, suponiendo que la indignación de su tío no le cerrara la puerta, no permitirían a Lucy la agitación de semejante encuentro. El mero hecho de verla sin hablar habría supuesto cierto alivio, ya que a Maggie se le aparecía una y otra vez un rostro tan dulce que resultaba cruel: un rostro que la miraba, con la tierna expresión del amor y la confianza, desde el crepúsculo de los recuerdos más antiguos, convertido ahora en un rostro triste y cansado por el primer disgusto amoroso. Y, a medida que pasaban los días, aquella imagen pálida iba creciendo y haciéndose más nítida debido al remordimiento; los suaves ojos de color avellana de expresión doliente se inclinaban siempre sobre Maggie y la atravesaban, tanto más cuanto que no veía rabia alguna en ellos. Pero Lucy todavía no podía ir a la iglesia ni a ningún lugar donde Maggie pudiera verla, e incluso esa esperanza se desvaneció cuando la tía Glegg le comunicó que Lucy se iba dentro de unos días a Scarborough con las señoritas Guest y, al parecer, habían dicho que esperaban que su hermano se reuniera allí con ellas.

Sólo quienes han sufrido un duro combate interno pueden saber lo que sintió Maggie cuando se quedó sentada y sola aquella tarde tras oír la noticia trasmitida por la señora Glegg; sólo lo entenderán quienes sepan lo que es temer que se cumplan los deseos egoístas, de la misma manera que la madre en vela temería el somnífero que debe apaciguar su dolor.

Permaneció en la penumbra sin ninguna vela, con la ventana abierta de par en par sobre el río; la sensación de calor opresivo se sumaba de modo indistinguible a la carga de su destino. Sentada en una silla frente a la ventana, con el brazo en el alféizar, miraba inexpresivamente el fluir del río, acelerado por el movimiento de la marea, esforzándose en ver todavía el

dulce rostro de una tristeza sin reproches, que parecía ahora hundirse y esconderse tras una forma que se interponía, oscureciéndolo todo. Oyó la puerta y pensó que era la señora Jakin con la cena, como de costumbre; y con esa repugnancia ante la conversación banal que acompaña a la languidez y la desdicha, ni siquiera se volvió hacia la puerta para decir que no quería nada: seguro que la pequeña y bondadosa señora Jakin haría algún comentario bienintencionado. Sin embargo, al instante siguiente, sin haber oído el rumor de pisada alguna, sintió una mano ligera sobre el hombro y oyó que una voz cercana le decía:

—¡Maggie!

Allí estaba su rostro, cambiado, pero igualmente dulce: allí estaban los ojos color avellana, de una ternura que atravesaba el corazón.

—¡Maggie! —dijo la voz queda.

—¡Lucy! —contestó una voz teñida de angustia.

Y Lucy abrazó a Maggie y apoyó la pálida mejilla contra una frente ardiente.

—He salido a hurtadillas cuando papá y los demás estaban fuera —susurró Lucy mientras se sentaba junto a Maggie y le tomaba la mano—. Alice me ha acompañado, le pedí que me ayudara. Pero sólo puedo quedarme un poco, porque es ya muy tarde.

No era fácil seguir hablando. Permanecieron sentadas, mirándose. Parecía que el encuentro terminaría sin más conversación, porque ésta resultaba muy difícil. Ambas sabían que las abrasarían las palabras que recordaran el error irreparable. Pero mientras Maggie contemplaba a su prima, una ola de arrepentimiento y palabras cariñosas estalló con un sollozo.

—Dios te bendiga por haber venido, Lucy.

Los sollozos de ambas se hicieron más intensos.

—Tranquilízate, Maggie —dijo Lucy, acercando de nuevo la mejilla a la de Maggie—. No sufras. Y permaneció inmóvil, con la esperanza de calmar a Maggie con aquella caricia.

—No quería engañarte, Lucy —dijo Maggie en cuanto pudo hablar—. Me atormentaba sentir algo que no quería que supieras… Pensaba que podría dominarlo, que nunca verías nada que te hiciera daño.

—Lo sé, querida —dijo Lucy—. Sé que no querías hacerme infeliz… Es como si nos hubiera caído encima una desgracia: para ti es más difícil y, además, lo abandonaste… Debió de ser muy duro.

Permanecieron en silencio de nuevo unos instantes, con las manos unidas y las mejillas juntas.

—Lucy —dijo Maggie de nuevo—, él también luchó, quería serte leal. Volverá contigo, perdónalo, entonces podrá ser feliz…

Estas palabras salieron de lo más profundo del alma de Maggie con un esfuerzo convulso, como el de un hombre que se ahogara. Lucy tembló y permaneció en silencio.

Sonó un golpe suave en la puerta. Era Alice, la doncella.

—No me atrevo a estar aquí por más tiempo, señorita Deane. Se darán cuenta de que ha salido y se enfadarán mucho cuando regrese tan tarde.

—Muy bien, Alice. Salgo dentro de un minuto —contestó Lucy levantándose—. Maggie: me voy el viernes —añadió en cuanto Alice cerró la puerta otra vez—. Cuando vuelva y me encuentre otra vez fuerte, me dejarán hacer lo que quiera. Entonces podré venir a verte siempre que lo desee.

—Lucy —contestó Maggie con otro gran esfuerzo—, rezo a Dios continuamente para no volver a causarte ninguna pena.

Apretó la manita que tenía entre las suyas y miró el rostro inclinado sobre el suyo. Lucy nunca olvidó aquella mirada.

—Maggie —dijo Lucy en una voz baja que poseía toda la solemnidad de una confesión—, eres mejor que yo. Yo no puedo…

Se interrumpió y no dijo hada más, pero se unieron otra vez en un último abrazo.

Capítulo V

El último conflicto

Una noche de la segunda semana de septiembre, Maggie se encontraba de nuevo sentada en su solitaria habitación, combatiendo contra los viejos enemigos fantasmales que resucitaban una y otra vez. Era más de medianoche y la lluvia golpeaba con furia contra la ventana, empujada por el viento irregular que gemía con estruendo. Al día siguiente de la visita de Lucy se produjo un repentino cambio en el tiempo: el calor y la sequía habían dado paso a vientos fríos y variables, así como a intensos chaparrones, de modo que le prohibieron que emprendiera el viaje previsto hasta que el tiempo mejorara. En los condados situados curso arriba del Floss, las lluvias habían sido continuas y se había interrumpido la recolección de la cosecha. En aquel momento hacía ya dos días que no cesaba de llover en aquel tramo bajo del río, de modo que los más ancianos movían la cabeza y hablaban de lo sucedido sesenta años atrás, cuando unas lluvias similares, hacia el equinoccio, trajeron las grandes inundaciones que se llevaron el puente y arrasaron la población. Con todo, la generación más joven, que había visto ya varias inundaciones pequeñas, no tomaba muy en serio esos recuerdos y augurios sombríos, y Bob Jakin, naturalmente propenso a confiar en su buena suerte, se reía de su madre cuando ésta se lamentaba de que hubieran tomado una casa junto a la orilla de río, diciéndole que, si no fuera por eso, no tendrían botes, que en caso de inundación serían la posesión más preciada para poder ir a buscar comida.

Sin embargo, en aquel momento dormían en sus camas tanto los despreocupados como los temerosos. Se esperaba que la lluvia amainara al día siguiente; los jóvenes recordaban que las peores amenazas como resultado de algún deshielo repentino tras una nevada habían pasado sin consecuencia alguna; y, en el peor de los casos, se desbordarían las orillas curso abajo cuando subiera la marea, y de igual manera se irían las aguas sin causar más que molestias temporales y pérdidas que sólo sufrirían los más pobres, a los que la caridad se encargaría de aliviar.

En aquel momento, todos estaban en la cama, porque era ya más de medianoche: todos, excepto algunos insomnes solitarios como Maggie. Estaba sentada en el pequeño salón, frente al río, con una vela que dejaba en penumbra toda la habitación menos la carta que tenía ante sí en la mesa. La carta, que había recibido durante el día, era una de las causas de estuviera todavía en pie, ajena al paso de las horas y sin preocuparse de buscar descanso, pues no concebía ya otro que el reposo lejano del que no volvería a despertar a esta vida terrenal llena de luchas. Dos días antes de recibir la carta, Maggie había ido a la rectoría por última vez. Desde entonces, la fuerte lluvia le habría impedido ir, pero no era ése el único motivo de su ausencia. El doctor Kenn, que al principio se enteró por algunas insinuaciones del sesgo que estaban tomando los chismorreos y las calumnias sobre Maggie, se había informado de todo a través de los vivos reproches de uno de sus parroquianos, el cual insistió en lo poco adecuado que era oponerse a través de la resistencia a los sentimientos dominantes en la parroquia. El doctor Kenn, que tenía la conciencia muy tranquila, se sentía inclinado a perseverar y era reacio a ceder ante un sentimiento público odioso y despreciable; pero terminó cediendo tras considerar que la responsabilidad de su cargo le exigía evitar la apariencia del mal y que esta «aparienci» depende siempre de la calidad media de las mentes del entorno. Allí donde éstas son toscas y groseras, la extensión de esta «aparienci» se amplía de modo proporcional. Quizá corría el peligro de actuar movido por la obstinación; tal vez fuera su deber rendirse: las personas escrupulosas son capaces de advertir en qué momento el deber exige tomar el camino más difícil, y para el doctor Kenn siempre había sido doloroso echarse atrás. Decidió que debía aconsejar a Maggie que se marchara de Saint Ogg’s una

temporada; y llevó a cabo esta difícil tarea con tanta delicadeza como pudo, limitándose a decirle vagamente que su permanencia era una fuente de discordia entre él y sus parroquianos que podría dificultar su utilidad como pastor. Le rogó que le permitiera escribir a un amigo suyo, también clérigo, que podría tomarla como institutriz; y, si él no podía, tal vez conociera algún puesto para una joven por cuyo bienestar el doctor Kenn se interesaba vivamente.

La pobre Maggie escuchó con labios temblorosos: no pudo decir más que un débil «gracias, se lo agradeceré» y se marchó a su alojamiento bajo la lluvia torrencial con una nueva sensación de desolación. No le quedaba más remedio que ser una nómada solitaria, tendría que ir a vivir entre caras nuevas que la mirarían con curiosidad mientras se preguntaban por qué los días no parecían aportarle felicidad alguna; debía empezar una nueva vida, en la que tendría que animarse para recibir nuevas impresiones ¡y se sentía indeciblemente cansada! Los que cometían errores no tenían hogar e incluso quienes se compadecían de ellos debían mostrarse duros. ¿Acaso debía quejarse? ¿Debía apartarse de una vida de penitencia, que era la única posibilidad de aligerar la carga de otros que también sufrían, y transformar así aquel error apasionado en una fuerza nueva de amor humano generoso? Pasó todo el día siguiente sentada en la solitaria habitación, ante una ventana oscurecida por las nubes y la fuerte lluvia, pensando en aquel futuro y esforzándose en tener paciencia ¿Qué reposo podía conseguir Maggie si no era luchando?

Y al tercer día, el día que acababa de terminar, había llegado la carta que tenía ante sí sobre la mesa.

La carta era de Stephen. Había regresado de Holanda: estaba en Mudport, sin que sus familiares lo supieran, y desde allí le escribía y entregaba la carta a una persona de su confianza. Desde el principio hasta el final, era un apasionado grito de reproche, una protesta por el inútil sacrificio: de él, de ella; contra aquella pervertida noción del bien que la había llevado a aplastar todas sus esperanzas por una simple idea, pero no por un bien concreto: las esperanzas de él, al que ella amaba y que la amaba con una pasión irresistible, con una adoración que un hombre sólo siente una vez en su vida por una mujer.

Me han escrito que vas a casarte con Kenn. ¡Como si fuera a creérmelo! Quizá te habrán contado cuentos parecidos sobre mí. Quizá te hayan dicho que he estado «viajand». Es cierto que mi cuerpo ha ido de un sitio a otro, pero yo no me he movido del horrible lugar donde me dejaste, donde desperté del estupor de una rabia impotente y vi que te habías ido.

¡Maggie! ¿Quién puede haber sufrido tanto como yo? ¿Quién tiene una herida como la mía? ¿Quién ha conocido, como yo, esa larga mirada de amor que ha ardido en mi alma de modo tal que ninguna otra imagen puede entrar en ella? ¡Maggie, dime que vaya contigo! ¡Llévame de nuevo a la vida y a la bondad! Ahora vivo desterrado de las dos. No tengo motivos: todo me da igual. Estos dos meses sólo han hecho más profunda la certeza de que la vida sin ti no me interesa. Escríbeme una sola palabra, dime «Ve» y en dos días estaré a tu lado. Maggie, ¿has olvidado lo que era estar juntos, mirarnos, oír la voz del otro?

Cuando Maggie leyó esta carta por primera vez tuvo la sensación de que la verdadera tentación acababa de empezar. A la entrada de la fría y oscura caverna, nos alejamos de la cálida luz con el coraje intacto; pero cómo encontrarlo después, cuando hemos avanzado en la húmeda oscuridad y hemos empezado a sentirnos débiles y cansados, y se abre repentinamente sobre nosotros una abertura que nos invita a regresar a la próvida luz del día. El impulso del deseo natural bajo la presión del dolor es tan intenso que es probable que olvidemos todos los motivos menos inmediatos hasta que escapemos del dolor.

Durante varias horas, Maggie se sintió como si su lucha hubiera sido en vano. Durante varias horas, la imagen de Stephen esperando la palabra que lo llevara hacia ella barrió cualquier otra idea. Maggie no había leído la carta: había oído la voz de Stephen pronunciando cada palabra, y su voz había tenido la misma extraña capacidad de conmoverla. A lo largo del día anterior se había alzado ante sí la visión de un futuro solitario que debería recorrer con la carga del arrepentimiento y con la única ayuda de la fe. ¡Y ahora, al alcance de la mano, imponiéndose casi como un derecho, se le presentaba otro futuro en el que en lugar de penalidades y esfuerzos se le ofrecía la posibilidad de descansar en la fuerza amorosa de otra persona! Y,

sin embargo, esa promesa de alegría en lugar de tristeza no era la mayor tentación para Maggie. Lo que le hacía vacilar era el tono de tristeza de Stephen, la duda sobre la justicia de su decisión, y fue eso lo que hizo que en una ocasión se levantara de su asiento para tomar papel y pluma y escribir: «¡Ven!».

Pero cuando estaba a punto de realizar ese acto decisivo, se echó atrás; y con un pinchazo, como si fuera una degradación consciente, sintió que aquello estaba en contradicción con su forma de ser en los momentos de fuerza y clarividencia. No —debía esperar, debía rezar—, la luz que había visto volvería: sentiría otra vez lo mismo que cuando huyó, empujada por una inspiración lo bastante fuerte para vencer la agonía, para vencer el amor: debía sentir otra vez lo mismo que cuando Lucy estaba a su lado, cuando la carta de Philip había hecho vibrar todas las fibras que la unían a un sosegado pasado.

Permaneció sentada y quieta, dejando pasar las horas de la noche: sin impulso para cambiar de actitud, sin fuerzas siquiera para rezar mentalmente: sólo esperaba la luz que, sin duda, volvería.

Y la luz llegó con los recuerdos que ninguna pasión podía apagar durante mucho tiempo: el pasado regresó y, con él, la fuente de la piedad, la renuncia y el afecto, la lealtad y la decisión. Las palabras que señalaba la mano quieta en el librito que había aprendido de memoria tiempo atrás brotaron en sus labios y encontraron salida en un bajo murmullo que se perdió en el estruendo de la lluvia contra la ventana y el fuerte gemido del viento: «He recibido la Cruz, la he recibido de tu mano; cargaré con ella y la soportaré hasta la muerte, puesto que tú me la has dad».

Pero no tardaron en surgir otras palabras, que sólo podían expresarse en sollozos: «¡Perdóname, Stephen! Todo pasará. Volverás con ell». Tomó la carta, la acercó a la vela y dejó que ardiera lentamente en la chimenea.

«Cargaré con ella, la soportaré hasta la muerte… ¡Pero cuánto tiempo queda hasta que llegue la muerte! Soy tan joven, tan sana. ¿Cómo voy a tener fuerza y paciencia? ¡Oh, Dios mío! ¿Tendré que luchar, caer y volver a arrepentirme? ¿La vida me reserva pruebas tan duras como éstas?». Con este grito de desesperación de sí misma, Maggie cayó de rodillas contra la mesa y ocultó el rostro lleno de dolor. Su alma se elevó hacia la Piedad

invisible que estaría con ella hasta el fin. ¿Acaso la experiencia le enseñaría algo y estaría aprendiendo el secreto de la ternura y el sufrimiento humanos, que quizá otros que no erraban desconocían? «Oh, Dios mío, si mi vida ha de ser larga, deja que viva con tu bendición y consuelo».

En aquel momento, Maggie se sobresaltó con una sensación de frío repentino en las rodillas y en los pies: el agua corría por el suelo. Se puso en pie de un brinco: el agua entraba por debajo de la puerta que conducía al pasillo. No se sintió desconcertada ni un instante: sabía que el río se había desbordado.

El tumulto de emociones que había estado soportando durante las últimas doce horas parecía haberle dejado una gran calma: sin gritar, con la vela en la mano, se encaminó a toda prisa al dormitorio de Bob Jakin. La puerta estaba entornada, entró y lo sacudió por el hombro.

—¡Bob! ¡Se ha desbordado el río! ¡Entra agua en la casa! Vamos a ver si podemos poner a salvo los botes.

Maggie encendió la vela de Bob mientras su pobre esposa agarraba a la nena y empezaba a gritar; después bajó corriendo las escaleras para ver si las aguas subían deprisa. A los pies de la escalera había una puerta que daba a una habitación, situada un peldaño más abajo: el agua llegaba ya a ese escalón. Mientras miraba, algo chocó contra la ventana con un tremendo estruendo y lanzó hacia el interior de la casa los cristales emplomados y el viejo marco de madera hechos añicos, tras lo cual el agua irrumpió torrencialmente.

—¡Es el bote! —gritó Maggie—. ¡Bob, ven a coger los botes!

Y sin miedo alguno se metió en el agua, que le llegaba ya a las rodillas, y, a la temblorosa luz de la vela que había dejado en las escaleras, subió al alféizar y trepó al interior del bote, que metía la proa por la ventana. Bob no tardó en bajar a toda prisa sin medias ni zapatos, pero con la linterna en la mano.

—¡Vaya! Si están aquí los dos, los dos botes —dijo Bob mientras se metía en el que estaba Maggie—. Qué suerte que no se hayan roto el amarre ni el embarcadero.

Con la agitación de subir al otro bote, desatarlo y coger un remo, a Bob no le inquietó el riesgo que corría Maggie. Cuando compartimos el peligro,

no tememos por quienes no tienen miedo, y Bob estaba concentrado en pensar en diversas alternativas para garantizar la seguridad de los seres indefensos que se encontraban dentro de la casa. El hecho de que Maggie hubiera estado en pie, lo hubiera despertado y hubiera tomado la iniciativa le daba a Bob la vaga impresión de que era alguien que le ayudaría a proteger a los demás y no necesitaba protección. Maggie también se había apoderado de un remo para empujar y sacar el bote de la ventana.

—El agua sube tan aprisa que creo que no tardará en llegar a las habitaciones, la casa es muy baja —dijo Bob—. Casi que prefiero meter a Prissy, la nena y mi madre en el bote y fiarme del agua, porque la casa es vieja y poco segura. Y si dejo el bote… ¡pero usted! —exclamó, levantando repentinamente la linterna hacia Maggie, que estaba de pie bajo la lluvia, con el remo en la mano y el cabello negro al viento.

Maggie no tuvo tiempo de contestar, porque una nueva ola avanzó entre las casas y arrastró los dos botes hacia la corriente principal con tal fuerza que los llevó más allá del punto de confluencia con la corriente del río.

Durante los primeros momentos, Maggie no sintió nada y creyó que acababa de abandonar esta vida que tanto había temido: aquello era el trance de la muerte sin agonía y estaba sola en la oscuridad con Dios.

Había sido todo tan rápido —tan irreal— que se habían roto los vínculos de la usual asociación de ideas: se dejó caer sobre el banco, agarró el remo de modo reflejo y, durante un rato, no fue consciente de dónde se encontraba. Lo primero que la hizo reaccionar fue el fin de la lluvia y la sensación de que una débil luz dividía la oscuridad en dos y permitía distinguir entre la penumbra situada en lo alto y la inmensidad de las aguas. La arrastraba la inundación: esa terrible visita de Dios de la que tanto hablaba su padre, pesadilla de sus sueños infantiles. Y ese pensamiento trajo consigo la visión de su casa, de Tom, de su madre, con quienes escuchaba esas historias.

—¡Dios mío! ¿Dónde estoy? ¿Por dónde se va a casa? —gritó en la oscura soledad.

¿Qué sucedía a quienes estaban en el molino? En una ocasión, una inundación estuvo a punto de destruirlo. Quizá se encontraran en peligro, en un apuro. ¡Su madre y su hermano, solos, sin que nadie pudiera prestarles

ayuda! Se estremecía con esa idea y veía los rostros amados buscando ayuda en la oscuridad sin encontrar ninguna.

Ahora flotaba en aguas lisas, tal vez perdida en los campos inundados. Ninguna sensación de peligro inminente le impedía pensar en su viejo hogar, y se esforzó por ver a través de la cortina de oscuridad para poder averiguar dónde se encontraba, para intentar distinguir algún indicio del lugar hacia el cual tendía su inquietud.

¡Con qué alegría recibió la progresiva extensión de las lúgubres aguas, la gradual elevación del nuboso firmamento, la lenta definición de los negros objetos sobre la brillante oscuridad! Sí, tenía que estar sobre los campos, aquéllas eran las copas de unos árboles formado seto. ¿Por dónde estaría el río? Miró hacia atrás y vio hileras de árboles negros: hacia delante no vio ninguno, luego tenía el río ante sí. Tomó el remo y empezó a remar hacia delante con la energía de una nueva esperanza: ahora que actuaba, el alba parecía avanzar más rápidamente, y no tardó en ver unas pobres bestias agrupándose lastimeramente sobre la colina en que se habían refugiado. Siguió remando con golpes ora superficiales, ora profundos a la creciente luz del amanecer: las ropas mojadas se le pegaban al cuerpo y el viento le agitaba el cabello suelto, pero apenas era consciente de ninguna sensación física, excepto la fuerza que le inspiraba la intensa emoción. Junto con la sensación de peligro y el deseo de rescatar a los recordados seres que vivían en su viejo hogar, experimentaba una indefinida sensación de reconciliación con su hermano. ¿Qué pelea, qué roce, qué falta de fe en el otro puede sobrevivir ante una gran catástrofe, cuando todos los artificios de nuestra vida han desaparecido, somos solo uno y sentimos las mismas necesidades primitivas? Maggie lo sentía de modo impreciso, mezclado con el intenso amor hacia su hermano que renacía y borraba todas las impresiones de dureza, crueldad e incomprensión, y dejaba los recuerdos profundos, subyacentes e inamovibles de los primeros años de unión.

Distinguió ahora una gran masa oscura a lo lejos y, más cerca, la corriente del río. Aquella masa negra tenía que ser… sí, era Saint Ogg's. Ah, ahora sabía hacia dónde mirar para localizar los árboles bien conocidos: los sauces grises, los castaños amarillentos y, por encima de ellos, el viejo tejado; pero todavía no se percibían formas ni colores: todo era tenue y

borroso. Se sentía cada vez más fuerte, como si estuviera gastando en aquel momento unas reservas que no necesitaría ya en el futuro.

Mientras imaginaba cada vez con mayor nitidez la situación en que se encontraría su viejo hogar, se le ocurrió pensar que debía meter el bote en la corriente del Floss para cruzar hasta el Ripple y acercarse a la casa; pero entonces sería fácil que la arrastrara la corriente y no pudiera volver a salir de ella. Por primera vez tuvo clara noción de peligro; pero no había elección, no había duda posible, y derivó hacia la corriente. Ahora corría sin esfuerzo; a medida que disminuía la distancia y aumentaba la luz, empezaba a distinguir objetos que identificaba como árboles y tejados bien conocidos: más aún, ya no estaba lejos de una fuerte corriente fangosa que debía de ser el Ripple, extrañamente cambiado.

¡Santo cielo! Las aguas arrastraban unos bultos flotantes que podían golpear el bote al pasar junto a ella y hacer que se ahogara demasiado pronto. ¿Qué serían aquellos bultos?

Por primera vez, el corazón de Maggie empezó a latir con un terrible temor. Permaneció sentada e indefensa, apenas consciente de que la arrastraban las aguas, pensando en el choque inminente. Pero el horror duró poco y desapareció antes de alcanzar los muelles de Saint Ogg's: así pues, había pasado ya la desembocadura del Ripple: ahora tenía que utilizar toda su habilidad y su fuerza para conducir el bote y sacarlo de la corriente. Vio entonces que el puente estaba roto: distinguió el mástil de un barco encallado a lo lejos, en los campos anegados. Pero no se veía ningún bote en el río: seguramente, estarían utilizando en las calles inundadas los que hubieran podido encontrar.

Con renovada decisión, Maggie se puso en pie para remar: pero el reflujo aceleraba la velocidad del río y la arrastró más allá del puente. Oyó gritos procedentes de las ventanas que daban sobre el río, como si la gente la llamara. Cuando se encontraba casi a la altura de Tofton, pudo salir de la corriente. Entonces, tras lanzar una mirada de anhelo hacia la casa del tío Deane, situada más abajo, tomó ambos remos y bogó con todas sus fuerzas por los campos inundados, retrocediendo hacia el molino. Los colores empezaban a despertar y, a medida que se acercaba a los campos de Dorlcote, fue distinguiendo los tonos de los árboles: vio los viejos pinos

albares a lo lejos, hacia la derecha, y los castaños de su casa. ¡Oh! El agua los cubría hasta muy arriba, más arriba que otros árboles situados en aquel lado de la colina. ¿Y el tejado del molino? ¿Dónde estaba? Y los pesados fragmentos que bajaban por el Ripple, ¿qué significaban? Pero no eran de la casa, la casa se mantenía firme: sumergida hasta el primer piso, pero firme ¿o tal vez estaba rota hacia el lado del molino?

Jadeando, feliz de haber llegado y más dichosa que inquieta, Maggie se acercó a la fachada de la casa.

Al principio no oyó nada: no vio que nada se moviera. El bote quedaba a la altura de las ventanas delanteras.

—Tom, ¿dónde estás? —llamó con voz alta y potente—. ¿Dónde está, madre? Soy yo, Maggie.

Enseguida, desde la ventana situada bajo el tejado, oyó la voz de Tom.

—¿Quién es? ¿Tiene un bote?

—Soy yo, Tom. ¿Dónde está madre?

—No está aquí: se fue a Garum anteayer. Voy a la ventana de abajo. —Y, cuando abrió la ventana central, situada al mismo nivel que el bote, preguntó, atónito—: ¿Estás sola, Maggie?

—Sí, Tom: Dios me ha tenido de su mano y me ha traído hasta aquí. Sube rápido. ¿Hay alguien más?

—No —contestó Tom, subiendo al bote—. Me temo que el encargado se ha ahogado, que se lo llevó el Ripple cuando se cayó parte del molino, derribado por las piedras y los árboles: llevo gritando todo el rato y nadie me ha contestado. Dame los remos, Maggie.

Sólo después de que se alejaran de allí, cuando se encontró sobre las aguas —cara a cara con Maggie—, Tom alcanzó a comprender la magnitud de lo sucedido. Fue una revelación tan abrumadora, tan inesperada sobre las profundidades de la vida, sobre todo lo que había sido incapaz de ver —él que creía tener una vista tan aguda y clara— que se sintió incapaz de hacer ninguna pregunta. Permanecieron sentados, mirándose: Maggie, con unos ojos intensamente vitales, lo miraba desde un rostro cansado, derrotado; Tom, pálido, con cierta expresión de respeto y humillación. El pensamiento estaba ocupado, pero los labios permanecían en silencio: y aunque no pudo formular ninguna pregunta, Tom adivinó el relato de un esfuerzo protegido

de modo casi milagroso. Al fin, una neblina cubrió los ojos de color gris azulado y los labios hallaron una palabra que podían pronunciar: el infantil «¡Maggie!».

Maggie no pudo dar otra respuesta que un sollozo largo y profundo que expresaba aquella felicidad misteriosa y maravillosa íntimamente ligada al dolor.

—Vamos a buscar a Lucy —dijo Maggie en cuanto pudo hablar—. Tom, vamos a ver si está a salvo, y después ayudaremos a los demás.

Tom remó con vigor infatigable, a velocidad muy distinta que la pobre Maggie. No tardó el bote en encontrarse de nuevo en la corriente del río, de modo que no tardarían en llegar a Tofton.

—Park House se encuentra por encima del nivel de las aguas —dijo Maggie—, quizá hayan enviado allí a Lucy.

No dijeron nada más; el río les traía un nuevo peligro. Parte de la maquinaria de madera de los muelles acababa de ceder y el agua arrastraba enormes fragmentos. Amanecía ya y la desolación de las aguas se extendía con terrible nitidez en torno a ellos, y con la misma terrible nitidez avanzaban a toda velocidad las masas amenazadoras. La numerosa tripulación de un bote que se abría paso bajo las casas de Tofton observó el peligro que corrían.

—¡Salgan de la corriente! —gritaron.

Pero no era fácil y Tom, mirando ante sí, vio cómo la muerte se precipitaba hacia ellos. Los enormes fragmentos, en fatal fraternidad, formaban una enorme masa que avanzaba con la corriente.

—¡Ya está aquí, Maggie! —dijo Tom con voz profunda y ronca, soltando los remos y abrazándola.

Al instante siguiente, el bote ya no estaba sobre las aguas y la enorme masa seguía su horrible marcha triunfal.

Pero no tardó en reaparecer la quilla del bote, como un punto negro en el agua dorada.

Reapareció el bote, pero los hermanos se habían hundido, unidos en un abrazo del que jamás se habrían de separar, reviviendo, en un momento supremo, los días en que, tomados de la mano en un gesto de cariño, vagaban por los campos de margaritas.

Conclusión

La naturaleza repara los estragos que causa, los arregla con el sol y el trabajo humano. Al cabo de cinco años, en la superficie de la tierra quedaban pocos restos de la desolación que trajo consigo aquella inundación. El quinto otoño fue rico en doradas gavillas, que se alzaban en densos montones entre los setos distantes; los muelles y almacenes del Floss bullían de actividad, con ecos de voces impacientes, con la carga y descarga de mercancías llenas de esperanza. Y todos los hombres y mujeres mencionados en esta historia seguían con vida, excepto aquellos cuyo fin ya conocemos.

La naturaleza repara los estragos que causa, pero no todos. Los árboles arrancados de cuajo no arraigan de nuevo, las colinas hendidas muestran sus cicatrices: si algo crece, los árboles ya no son los mismos, y bajo el ropaje verde, las colinas llevan las marcas de los viejos desgarros. Para los ojos que conocen bien el pasado, la reparación no es completa.

El molino de Dorlcote estaba reconstruido. Y el cementerio de Dorlcote —cuya tumba de ladrillo, que albergaba a un padre que conocemos, se encontró con la lápida caída tras la inundación— había recuperado el orden herboso y la quietud adecuada.

Cerca de la tumba de ladrillo se alzaba otra tumba, construida al poco de la inundación, para los dos cadáveres que habían hallado estrechamente abrazados: recibía visitas frecuentes de dos hombres que sentían que su mayor alegría y su mayor pena yacían allí para siempre.

Uno de los dos visitó otra vez la tumba acompañado de un dulce rostro, pero eso fue años más tarde.

El otro fue siempre solitario. Su mayor compañía se encontraba entre los árboles de las Fosas Rojas, donde la alegría enterrada parecía rondar como un espíritu.

En la tumba aparecían los nombres de Tom y Maggie Tulliver, y bajo éstos, la siguiente inscripción:

«Tampoco en su muerte fueron separados».[35]

GEORGE ELIOT, es el seudónimo que empleó la escritora británica Mary Anne Evans (Arbury Farm, Astley 1819 - Londres, 1880).

Usó un nombre masculino para asegurar que su trabajo fuera tomado en serio. Pocas escritoras publicaban bajo sus nombres verdaderos, como el caso de Charlotte Brontë y sus hermanas. George Eliot quiso evitar ser vista simplemente como una escritora romántica.

Sus novelas, de gran estilo realista, reflejan con pesimismo la vida provinciana británica y en general la complejidad de la vida británica de su época. Recrean conflictos morales, en los que ella aboga por la autenticidad. Entre sus obras más famosas se encuentran Adam Bede (1859), El molino junto al Floss (1860) y Silas Marner (1861). Son novelas que tratan de la región de Warwickshire y en gran parte están basadas en su propia vida. Sus viajes por Italia inspiraron su novela siguiente, Romola (1863), una novela histórica sobre el predicador y reformador Girolamo Savonarola y la Florencia del siglo XV. Comenzada en 1861, apareció por

entregas en The Cornhill Magazine antes de publicarse en 1863. Después de terminar Romola, escribió dos destacadas novelas, Felix Holt, el Radical (1866), sobre la política inglesa, y Middlemarch (1872), que trata de la vida y responsabilidades morales de la clase media inglesa en una ciudad de provincias. Daniel Deronda (1876) es una novela en la que ataca el antisemitismo y simpatiza con el nacionalismo judío.

Notas

[1] Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, acto I, escena V. (Esta nota, como las siguientes, es de la traductora). <<

[2] Se refiere a *Pug's Tour through Europe or, 71 he Travell d Monkey: containing His wonderful Adventures in the Principal Capitals of the greatest Empires Kingdoms and States* (Londres, 1824). Obra anónima que describe con toscas rimas los distintos países. <<

[3] Protagonista de la segunda parte de El viaje del peregrino El río sobre el que no hay puente es el de la muerte. <<

[4] Juego similar al hockey. <<

[5] De la cantata Acis y Galatea (1732), de Haendel, con letra de John Gay. <<

[6] Alusión a la definición de la tragedia de Aristóteles (Poética VI, 2). <<

[7] El demonio que encuentra Cristiano en el Valle de la humillación, en *El viaje del peregrino*, de John Bunyan (1678). <<

[8] Guia protector de Cristiana en la segunda parte de *El viaje del peregrino*. <<

[9] Heroína de la balada del mismo nombre de Gottfried August Bürger (1774). <<

[10] De la excursión, I, Wordsworth. <<

[11] Referencia a Douglas A Tragedy de John Home (1757). <<

[12] Durante el siglo XVIII y principios del XIX algunos, jornaleros sin trabajo incendiaron pajares y enviaron cartas amenazadoras firmadas por el «capitán Swin» a los propietarios de máquinas trilladoras. <<

[13] Referencia a *Leaves from the Note Book of a Naturalist*, de W. J. Broderip (1852). <<

[14] Aristóteles, Poética, XXII, 16. <<

[15] Alusión a The Task, V, 29, obra de William Cowper (1785). <<

[16] «¡Deliciosa tarea!, criar el tierno pensamiento / enseñar a germinar a la joven ide», de «La primaver» en Las estaciones de james Thomson (1726-1730). <<

[17] Personaje de *La doncella de Perth*, de Walter Scott (1828). <<

[18] Sátiras, 11, 2, 79, Horacio. <<

[19] Autor de novelas populares e intrascendentes. <<

[20] Palabra hebrea que designa unas estatuillas de bronce y arcilla deforma más o menos humana Eran ídolos familiares comparables a los dioses lares o los penates latinos. <<

[21] «Zeus fue ayer al Océano a reunirse con los intachables etíope», Riada, 423; traducción de Emilio Crespo Güemes, Ed. Gredos. <<

[22] Personaje de *Guy Mannering*, de Walter Scott (1815). <<

[23] Génesis, 7,22. <<

[24] Alusión a los protestantes que murieron en la hoguera durante el reinado de María I Tudor (1553-1558), conocida como *Bloody Mary*. Este fragmento, al igual que otras referencias poco amables a los católicos, no aparece en las traducciones anteriores al castellano de *El molino del Floss*. <<

[25] Novela de Walter Scott, (1821. <<

[26] Aria de *Acis y Galalea, de Haendel (1732)*. <<

[27] *El infierno, Divina Comedia*, de Dante. <<

[28] *Madame* de Staël, *Corinne* novela publicada en 1807. La protagonista es una famosa artista brillante y apasionada. <<

[29] Rebecca, Flora Mac-Ivor y Minna son personajes de Ivanhoe, Waveley y El pirata, de Walter Scott. <<

[30] William Pinnock (1782-1843) fue autor de numerosos libros de texto; *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon Gent* es un conjunto de cuentos y ensayos sobre viajes escrito por Washington Irving en 1819-1820. <<

[31] Alusión al aforismo de Montesquieu: «Dichoso el pueblo cuyos anales en el libro de la Historia permanecen en blanc». Recuerda otra frase similar, pero posterior en el tiempo, de Tolstoi en *Ana Karenina (1875)*: «Todas las familias felices se parecen, pero las familias desgraciadas lo son cada una a su maner».<<

[32] *Sir* Andrew Agüe-cheek (don Andrés de Carapálida en la versión española), personaje de Noche de Reyes, de William Shakespeare. La cita corresponde al acto II, escena 3. <<

[33] Protagonista de Tom Jones, novela de Henry Fielding (1749). <<

[34] Opera de Michael William Balfe, 1808-1870.<<

[35] Del lamento de David por Saúl y Jonatán (2 Samuel 1, 23). <<